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Privilege, Prejudice, Predicament: “PRC Scholars” in Singapore—An Overview

Abstract With the rise of educational mobilities worldwide, students’ experiences of educational sojourn, especially that of the Chinese Mainland students, have come under greater research attention in recent years. Amongst diverse kinds of Chinese students/scholars abroad, this paper focuses on a type that finds themselves in a unique country under equally unique circumstances: Chinese students studying at pre- and undergraduate levels in Singapore under Singapore’s government-sponsored “foreign talent” scholarship schemes. Based on an ethnographic study conducted over a 16-month period in China and Singapore, this paper presents an overview account of these Chinese student-scholars’ sociocultural experiences in Singapore under three headings: (1) privilege—how Singapore’s “foreign talent” policy endows considerable privileges, opportunities, but also responsibilities on these Chinese students; (2) prejudice—how and why these PRC “foreign talents” encounter certain local discourses of discrimination and exclusion; and (3) predicament—how they sometimes experience complex and conflicted feelings about being made Singapore’s “foreign talent.”

Keywords Chinese scholars abroad, foreign talent, international students, educational mobility

Introduction

Over the more than three decades since China opened up to the world, the international presence of Chinese students has grown dramatically, and is by now notable in many parts of the world. The annual number of Chinese citizens going

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abroad for study grew from negligible in 1978 to about 180,000 in 2008 (Xiang & Shen, 2009), and subsequently almost doubled again in just three years, reaching nearly 340,000 in 2011 (Wang, 2013). It has been noted that China is already the largest source of overseas students in the world (Bodycott, 2009). According to a Chinese report released in 2012 (Wang, 2013), the cumulative number of Chinese students who went abroad between 1978 and 2011 is over 2.24 million, and students from China now make up the largest single nationality group of foreign students in many developed countries, including the UK, Canada, Japan, and more recently the US. Sources suggest, as of 2006, only about a quarter of all Chinese students overseas had returned to China on a long-term basis (Welch & Zhen, 2008, p. 520; Xiang, 2011, p. 836), thus giving us some indication as to the extent to which Chinese scholars and students abroad have become an integral feature of the diverse "ethnoscapes" (Appadurai, 1991) of today's globalized world.

Although in the early reform years most Chinese students/scholars went abroad either under the conditional sponsorship (i.e., requiring them to return to China to work) of their state employers or on postgraduate (often at doctoral level) scholarships granted by overseas institutions (Liu, 1997; Xiang & Shen, 2009), various researchers (Bodycott, 2009; Fong, 2011; Lai, To, Lung, & Lai, 2012; Tsang, 2013; Waters, 2008; Xiang & Shen, 2009) have observed that since the late 1990s, the vast majority of Chinese students venturing abroad became self-financing (*zifei*), and the percentages of self-funded undergraduate and pre-undergraduate students increased significantly. What motivates such substantial financial investments in international education by increasing numbers of Chinese individuals and their families, as these researchers point out, is, above all, a strategic desire to convert economic capital into prized social and cultural capital in terms of Western educational credentials as well as foreign living and working experiences, which in turn are expected to reproduce and enhance existing social advantages. Although Vanessa Fong's (2011) account has to some extent deconstructed the stereotypical impression that pre-/undergraduate Chinese students abroad all come from wealthy family backgrounds, the general perception remains in China that studying abroad at pre-/undergraduate levels is of a notably different nature or character compared to studying abroad at postgraduate levels, especially at the doctoral level. One simple but important reason for this perception is that, at pre-/undergraduate

levels, fully-funded studies are still relatively rare, whereas in the case of Chinese student-scholars pursuing doctoral research degrees abroad, a significant percentage of them do so with scholarships. Increasingly, self-funded overseas study is at the risk of attracting people's suspicions over the quality/qualifications of the students and the educational standards and credibility of those overseas institutions that accept them; this is reflected in a cynical popular phrase in China: *laji liuxue*, or "trashy study-abroad" (Liu as cited in Abelman & Kang, in press).

This paper brings under spotlight a unique type of Chinese students abroad that does not fit into these stereotypical imaginations and facile categories. Positioned somewhat in between the self-funded pre-/undergraduate international students and the scholarship-receiving postgraduate research student-scholars, they are the so-called "foreign talent" pre-/undergraduate students that have been recruited by the Singapore government from China in a highly systematic and sustained fashion since the 1990s. Different from self-funded Chinese international students who are typically academically non-elite and who often make use of study-abroad agencies (see e.g., Coates, 2013; Fong, 2011), these "foreign talent" students are instead "hand-picked" by the officials of Singapore's Ministry of Education after being put through written tests and interviews. Once selected, they are provided full funding for the entire duration of their pre-/university courses in Singapore, usually with the condition that they legally consent to working for a number of years in Singapore after graduation (i.e., the scholarship "bond"). Commonly known in Singapore as the "PRC scholars," these Chinese students have been recruited from China mainly through three long-running scholarship schemes known respectively as the "SM1," "SM2," and "SM3" programs.

This paper has a threefold aim. Firstly, it offers an informative overview of these three Singaporean schemes, and what *privileges* they confer upon the young Chinese students. Secondly, bearing in mind that these "PRC scholars" are both internationally mobile students as well as a unique type of nation-state subjects in the context of Singapore, i.e., "foreign talent," the author provides an overview account of the sociocultural experiences of these Chinese student-scholars in terms of the social controversies that they engender and the *prejudices* they sometimes encounter in Singapore. Thirdly, it is argued that being simultaneously privileged and prejudiced against makes the "PRC

scholars” subjective experiences often complex and conflictory, sometimes involving a sense of predicament. It is important to note, because this paper offers an overview, data and analyses are inevitably presented in a condensed manner. It does not claim to be an exhaustive account either. And although privilege, prejudice, and predicament are to be presented separately for the sake of clarity, in reality these categories of experiences are inevitably concurrent and intertwined.

Before proceeding to these three substantive sections, this paper first briefly reviews existing research on international students’ sociocultural experiences in relation to educational sojourn. Then, some succinct but necessary background information is offered on the topic of “foreign talent” in the context of Singapore to highlight the uniqueness of this case. An account of the research methods, fieldwork, and data is also provided.

Sociocultural Experiences of Students in Higher Education

Concerning international students in higher education, existing literature has rightly acknowledged the problems and difficulties that often stood out in their experiences. For example, Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) suggest that, compared with generally-defined college students, international students experience added difficulties in terms of “culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to unfamiliar social norms, eating habits, customs and values, differences in education systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness, and a loss of established social networks” (p. 364). Cushner and Karim (2004) similarly characterize studying abroad as “a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes” (p. 292).

The difficulties that international students experience in the host environment range from academic ones to those in the sociocultural realms. For example, researchers have variously examined the “culture shock” (e.g., Adler, 1975; Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), “learning/education shock” (e.g., Campbell & Li, 2008; Gu & Maley, 2008; Yamazaki, 2005; Zhang & Brunton, 2007), “language shock” (e.g., Agar, 1996; Brown, 2008; Ryan & Twibell, 2000), “communication shock” (e.g., Aveni, 2005; Holmes, 2004, 2007) etc., that international students in

higher education typically encounter and struggle with. These interrelated (Zhou & Todman, 2009, p. 485) and sometimes overlapping sub-categories of difficulties and “shocks” mean that, at the sociocultural level, negative experiences such as social marginalization (e.g., Tian & Lowe, 2009)—sometimes compounded by racist/neo-racist discrimination and abuse (e.g., Baas, 2010; Lee, 2010; Lee & Rice, 2007)—and negative feelings/emotions such as loneliness (e.g., Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008) and vulnerability (e.g., Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010) are sadly common for many international students.

“Ghettoization” has been observed as a persisting phenomenon among international students (e.g., Brown & Holloway, 2008; Kim, 1988) whereby they retreat into interacting with only co-nationals and/or other international students while failing to establish meaningful contact with students and people from the host society (e.g., Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Holmes, 2007; Nathan, 2005). Yet, it is precisely this contact with host nationals that is believed to be uniquely important, because of the actual and perceived benefits it brings to the international students, such as “improved language capability, increased satisfaction with the total student experience and greater host communicative competence” (Brown, 2009a, p. 184). Earlier research has also identified a positive relationship between international students’ successful adjustment to the host environment and the amount and frequency of their interactions with host nationals (e.g., Furnham & Bochner, 1982; Selltiz & Cook, 1962). Given that international students have taken considerable efforts and made substantial investments in order to study abroad, it is not surprising that among the international students there is generally found to be a desire to achieve contact/friendship/bond with the host nationals (e.g., Brown, 2009a, 2009b; Holmes, 2007; Lewthwaite, 1996).

While much of the existing literature focuses on the problematic and worrying aspects of international students’ experiences, some researchers have also, on a more positive note, pointed to the transformative effects that an international educational experience can have on the sojourners. For instance, the experience is described by some as a process of “(inter-)cultural learning” (e.g., Alred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003; Ward et al., 2001), where the “acquisition...of appropriate behavior and skills” (Brown & Holloway, 2008, p. 235) takes place over time, resulting in the students “becoming different, evolving a new self”

(Brown & Holloway, 2008, p. 245). Milstein (2005) suggests that studying abroad helps the students achieve revised self-understandings/concepts, and Murphy-Lejeune (2003) characterizes the experience as a “maturing process” which “takes the shape of a personal expansion, an opening of one’s potential universe” (p. 113).

In the subsequent accounts of the experiences of the “PRC scholars” in Singapore, implicit references to the themes and issues highlighted above will be made. Through drawing such implicit connections and comparisons, the author aims to shed light on both what is universal and what is unique about the experiences of these Chinese students as Singapore’s “foreign talents.”

Singapore and Its “Foreign Talent” Policies

In recent years, international students in Singapore have often been conceptualized and spoken of under the discursive rubric of “foreign talent,” a ubiquitous policy catchphrase the genesis of which could be traced back to the early 1980s (Quah, 1984). As post-independence (1965) Singapore underwent industrialization and emerged as one of Asia’s “tiger economies” by the 1980s, the city-state’s forward-looking policy makers felt it imperative to shift their strategic emphasis to developing a highly skilled workforce and transforming the country into a knowledge-based economy (Low, 2002). Also since the late 1980s, Singapore began to experience certain social problems—at least in the eyes of the state—associated with industrialization, such as declining fertility rates (Hudson, 2013; Sun, 2011) as well as “brain drain” due to emigration (Tan, 2005). Hence, welcoming skilled or talented foreigners to study, work, and possibly settle in Singapore was believed to be not just a desirable policy move but also a necessary one in order to secure Singapore’s continuous economic prosperity.

Concrete “foreign talent” policy measures began to be implemented vigorously during the 1990s and continued well into the 2000s. As various researchers in Singapore have noted (e.g., Wong, 1997; Yeoh, 2004, 2006; Yeoh & Huang, 1999), one important way in which this policy was pursued has been through operating a highly calculated immigration regime and a foreign manpower management system that treated foreigners of different skill levels in highly differentiated ways.

Education constituted another major arena in which the Singapore state eagerly participated in the “global war for talent” (Ng, 2011). Not only was Singapore’s domestic education system and policies in various ways re-gearred towards cultivating talents suited to the 21st century global knowledge economy (Gopinathan, 2007; Koh, 2010), efforts have also been devoted to harnessing additional talents by recruiting international students from both the region and beyond to study in Singapore. For instance, in the early 2000s, the government launched an ambitious “Global Schoolhouse” project (Ng & Tan, 2010; Olds, 2007), with a view of increasing the total number of international students studying in Singaporean educational institutions of all levels, both public and private, to 150,000 in ten years’ time. More specifically, various generously funded scholarship schemes were initiated since the 1990s to recruit able foreign students to study amidst the locals in Singapore’s public schools and higher educational institutions (see also Koh, 2012). By 2012, annually over 1,000 undergraduate scholarships and nearly another 1,000 pre-tertiary scholarships were granted to “foreign talent” students (Yeoh & Lin, 2013, pp. 39–40). These scholarships are typically initiated and monitored by the Ministry of Education, indirectly funded by the state through government-linked corporations, and executed and managed by local educational institutions themselves. “Scholars” are recruited mostly from developing Asian nations such as India, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) countries, but most notably of all, from the People’s Republic of China (PRC). The “SM1,” “SM2,” and “SM3” PRC scholarship schemes epitomize this intersection between international student mobility and Singapore’s “foreign talent” strategy, because although no official statistics are available, there can be little doubt that “PRC scholars” make up the largest group of “foreign talent” students in Singapore over the years (Yeoh & Lin, 2013). But before these PRC scholarship schemes are addressed, it remains necessary to first briefly mention some of the controversial social repercussions of the “foreign talent” policies.

The “foreign talent” policies have had visible and profound impacts on Singapore’s social landscape in the recent decade. In 1990, before the “foreign talent” policies kicked in, the population in Singapore was 3 million, of which 90 per cent were citizens; by mid-2013, however, the figure was 5.4 million, of which nearly 40 per cent were non-citizens (Department of Statistics, 2013). Among the over 1.3 million foreigners currently pursuing work in Singapore,

roughly a quarter falls under the “talent” category (Ministry of Manpower, 2014). By the end of 2010, the total number of international students in Singapore stood slightly below 100,000 (Davie, 2010, November 11). Such a significant presence of foreigners in a small, densely-populated island, and their seemingly incessant arrival, started to cause considerable social tensions. An influx of all manners of immigrants is felt by native Singaporeans to be responsible for not only the deterioration in quality of life in terms of public space/transport overcrowding, labor/education market competition and soaring housing prices, but also for the erosion of the sense of community and belonging. Strong dissenting voices protesting against the government’s “foreign talent” policies began to emerge from the public (Koh, 2003; Yang, 2014a), but often it seems difficult to disentangle such discontent directed against the state from feelings of resentment and hostility targeting the “foreign talents” themselves. Of late, there has been some serious public debate as to whether a “xenophobic” sentiment has arisen widely amongst Singaporeans (Lim & Ong, 2013, February 21). Responding to public sentiments, in the past two years, the Singaporean government introduced certain moderating measures such as the tightening of immigration criteria. This, however, does not undermine the state’s fundamental belief in the desirability and necessity of “foreign talent” to the island-state’s economic vitality, and hence the controversy surrounding “foreign talent” is likely to persist. It is in such a context that one can better appreciate how the “PRC scholars”’ privileges become entangled with prejudices and predicaments.

Research Methods, Fieldwork, and Data

This paper draws on an ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a 16-month period (April 2011 to July 2012) in two countries (China and Singapore). The China phase of the fieldwork (April 2011 to July 2011) consisted in participant observation and ethnographic interviews with most of the 24 candidates for that year’s “SM2” selection rounds in the southern Chinese province of Jiangxi, which gave the author an in-depth view into the recruitment process of the “SM2” scholarship program. The Singapore stage fieldwork (August 2011 to July 2012), on the other hand, entailed ethnographic investigations among all three types of “PRC scholars” at various stages of their “foreign talent” career.

With regard to the undergraduate level “PRC scholars,” this study’s primary

field site consisted of a major public university in Singapore with a focus on technology and engineering. The author is of Chinese mainland origin and a graduate of this university, so personal knowledge of the setting and social networks were employed to gain access to informants using the snow-balling technique. Accessing informants through friendship and social networks afforded the author the advantage of making close ethnographic observations of and personal level interactions with many “PRC scholars” in informal settings such as dinner gatherings, leisure outings, and chitchat sessions.

Throughout the Singapore fieldwork, the author came into contact with up to 200 “PRC scholars” of varying ages (17–30), backgrounds, and experiences. In addition, semi-structured interviews (usually lasting from 1 to 2 hours; mostly one-on-one, sometimes group-based) were carried out with 49 informants, chosen based on their willingness to articulate their experiences. Of these 49 interviewees, 29 (M = 14, F = 15; “SM1” = 5, “SM2” = 13, “SM3” = 11) were undergraduates, while the rest 20 (M = 13, F = 7; “SM1” = 4, “SM2” = 10, “SM3” = 6) were ex-scholars who had graduated and were already either working in professional jobs or pursuing postgraduate research.

Apart from doing ethnography in the “real world,” in order to situate the “PRC scholars” in the broader context of Singapore society and the “foreign talent”-related discourses, the author also foraged ethnographically into the mediasphere, both digital and print, analyzing the content of Singapore’s major English daily broadsheet *The Straits Times* across a span of 20 years (from 1992 to 2011), in search for the society’s evolving discourse on “foreign talent,” “foreign students,” “PRC scholars” and so forth. Besides, sustained attention was paid to digital media such as online forums, blogs and content-sharing websites such as YouTube and social networking sites such as Facebook, because in recent years, these media spaces have been where discourses in Singapore about “foreign talents”/“PRC scholars,” especially those involving *prejudice*, were often generated and circulated.

Throughout the research process, the author enjoyed no official patronage, and hence no access to the authorities and/or institutions that hold some key statistics pertaining to the research topic. All the statistics, data, and information presented in this paper are either based on field engagement with research participants or were obtained from publicly available sources such as the Internet, newspapers, and scholarly sources.

This paper is an informative though admittedly skeletal overview of some of the findings emerging from this research.

Privilege

Chinese “foreign talent” students at pre-undergraduate and undergraduate levels have been recruited to Singapore mainly through three scholarship schemes (see Table 1), all of which originated in the 1990s.

“SM1”

“SM1”—with “SM” standing for “Senior Middle”—is a pre-tertiary level scholarship scheme first established in the mid-1990s. It targets Chinese students, usually around the age of 15, who are about to start Senior Middle school Grade 1 (or Grade 10 in total schooling years). Currently, approximately 30 Singaporean secondary schools participate in the “SM1” programme—though this number was probably smaller in the earlier years—and each recruits between several and a few dozens of students from their Chinese feeder schools every year. Each Singaporean school typically has multiple feeder schools located in different Chinese provinces or cities. These Singaporean schools established collaborative relationships with their feeder schools through the facilitation of the Singapore Ministry of Education and the educational authorities in China. Feeder schools in China are usually high-ranking ones in their respective provinces/cities, and scholars are chosen from among the most academically capable students in these schools. Students volunteer to apply, sometimes with their schools’ recommendations; they then undergo written tests and interviews conducted by the Singaporean school officials and teachers who visit China each year specifically for the purpose of scholar selection. Without access to accurate figures, the author estimates that each year more than 200 “SM1” scholars are recruited. Based on interactions with “SM1” scholars, it can be said with some confidence that the majority of “SM1” scholars come from urban middle-class family backgrounds and above.

“SM1” scholars have completed their junior middle school (Year 7–9) in China when recruited; once in Singapore, they join the third year of the four-year local secondary school education. Upon taking “O Level” exams at the

Table 1 Singapore Government Sponsored “PRC Scholarships”

Singapore Government-sponsored PRC Scholarship Schemes	Operating years	Sources of scholars	Phase (in China) at which scholars are recruited	Yearly intake	Full scholarship duration	Singapore participating education institutions	Bond
SM1	Mid-1990s–present	Top junior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	End of junior middle school	(Approx.) 200	Secondary 3 to end of Junior College	(Approx.) 30 secondary schools; ^a Junior college depending on scholars’ own choices/applications	n/a
SM2	1997–2016 (planned)	Top senior middle schools in various Chinese provinces	Senior middle school (Year 2)	200–400	18 months “bridging course” and undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	Six years
SM3	1992–2011	(Approx.) 20 highly ranked Chinese universities ^b	University (Year 1)	(Approx.) 200–400	Six months “bridging course” and undergraduate	NUS NTU (since 2011 also SUTD)	Six years

Note. a. A list of Singapore’s SM1 participating schools, dated in May 2011, is provided on the following Chinese webpage: <http://hi.baidu.com/zhuiliang123/item/9399818ad2924857e73d1964>, retrieved January 1, 2014. b. NUS: Notiond University of Singapore; NTU: Nanyang Technological University; SUTD: Singapore University of Technology and Design. c. See <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E4%B8%AD%E6%96%B0%E5%A5%96%E5%A6%E9%87%91%E9%A1%B9%E7%9B%AE>, retrieved January 1, 2014.

end of secondary school, they typically proceed to local junior colleges to study for two years towards “A Level” exams. During this four-year duration, the “SM1” scholars are exempted all tuition fees and are provided free accommodation and catering, either at hostels that are specially arranged for them or in the dormitories of the schools they attend. According to an “SM1” scholar informant who came to Singapore in 2003, during his four-year tenure as a scholar, all scholars also received 200 Singapore dollars (SGD) monthly in pocket allowance.

The most generous feature about the “SM1” scholarship is perhaps the fact that it does not carry any “bond.” In other words, “SM1” scholars are free to leave or stay in Singapore to pursue whatever future they see fit. For “SM1” scholars from wealthy families, this means that they could use the “A Level” qualifications they obtained in Singapore to apply for places in top Western universities, usually those in the US or UK. From anecdotal evidence, it seems indeed the case that a fair share of “SM1” scholars come from families that are well-off enough to afford undergraduate education at elite universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. According to an “SM1” scholar research participant, most “SM1” scholars have ambitions to attend world-top universities in either the UK or North America and many of them achieve strong enough “A Levels” to qualify for such universities; the only obstacle remains financial means, and “SM1” scholars who remain in Singapore for higher education do so typically out of pragmatic consideration, since the Singapore government offers a blanket grant (“Tuition Grant”) applicable to all students in local higher education which covers a large part of the tuition fees (Ministry of Education, 2014). Another privilege associated with the “SM1” scholarship is that scholars are eligible for Permanent Residence status in Singapore when they complete junior college education. This offer is usually taken up by female scholars no matter whether they intend to stay in Singapore in the long run or not; on the contrary, virtually no male scholar takes it, because for them it would involve a two-year compulsory military service (“National Service”) before they can matriculate at university.

“SM2” and “SM3”

“SM2” and “SM3” are both undergraduate level PRC scholarships, which share

some notable similarities between them.

The “SM3” scholarship scheme commenced in 1992 and concluded in 2011, after 20 cohorts had been put through. “SM3” scholars are recruited from among first-year students in more than a dozen highly ranked Chinese universities (e.g., Zhejiang University, Jilin University, Chongqing University, Dalian Science and Technology University). Singapore Ministry of Education officials and university representatives travel to these feeder universities in China to conduct selection exams and interviews, through which they pick the scholars. Upon arrival in Singapore—typically in November/December each year—the “SM3” scholars undergo a six-month “bridging course” designed to intensively improve their English and prepare them for university.

The “SM2” scheme commenced in 1997, and it has been suggested that it will also conclude after 20 cohorts, with the last one to be recruited in 2016. Scholarships are awarded to second year senior middle school students from over a dozen Chinese provinces, from Heilongjiang in the north to Guangdong in the south. The number of eligible Chinese provinces increased with time, doubling from nine in 2002 to eighteen in 2011 and 2012. Similarly, certain top-ranking feeder schools have been identified in each eligible province, and Singapore Ministry of Education officials and university representatives travel to these feeder schools to conduct the selection. Upon arrival in Singapore, “SM2” scholars take an 18-month “bridging course,” which is also aimed at intensively improve their command of academic English and help them adapt to the local education system. From 2012 onwards, the “bridging course” for “SM2” was shortened to 12 months.

In both the cases of “SM2” and “SM3,” the scholar is provided a paid-for initial flight to Singapore, guaranteed a place in either of the two more established local public universities,¹ exempted all tuition and accommodation fees until they complete their normal course of undergraduate study, and given a 500 SGD/month living allowance.² The “SM2” scheme’s annual intake has increased from below 200 in the earlier cohorts to nearly 400 students in recent years. “SM3” is believed to have a similar intake scale although concrete figures are lacking. Absent authoritative statistics, it is estimated that the “SM2”/“SM3”

¹ From 2011 onwards, a newly established Singaporean university, Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD), became the third eligible destination.

² The living allowance increased to 800 SGD/month from 2012 onwards.

schemes, in combination, have so far brought up to 15,000 PRC students into Singapore. In contrast to the bond-free “SM1” scheme, however, both these two scholarships have certain conditions. Firstly, scholars are required to specialize in engineering and science subjects upon university matriculation; indeed, the scholarship selection exams they underwent in China prior to coming to Singapore strongly emphasized mathematics and science. While scholars are asked to indicate their preference between the eligible Singaporean universities, allocation is basically carried out by the Ministry of Education. Secondly, both scholarships carry a legal “bond” requiring the scholar to work in Singapore for a total of six years upon finishing the undergraduate degree. Three of these six years are the condition for receiving the blanket “Tuition Grant,” while the remaining three years reflect the living allowances and additional perks that are specific to “SM2”/“SM3” schemes.

Prejudice

Being desired “talents” that their Singapore state patron hopes would one day sink roots in the island-nation, the “PRC scholars” can be said to be taken good care of, and the vast majority of them reported generally positive and enriching experiences during their Singapore sojourn. However, given the increasing levels of anxiety and discontent in the Singapore society at large about “foreign talent,” as touched on earlier, the various privileges that the “PRC scholars” enjoy, or are perceived to enjoy, lead not a few in the local society to feel uneasy or, in some cases, resentful. The “PRC scholar” as an *abstract figure* is often subject to various negative perceptions or discursive constructions in either private speech or public discussion such as those found in the traditional as well as new media. While such negative local perceptions or attitudes do not necessarily always impinge upon lived daily experiences, they affect the interactions and mutual perceptions between the “PRC scholars” and their Singaporean hosts in subtle ways. Below, some of the prominent themes or forms of prejudice are expanded upon.

Loyalty

While the “SM1” scheme is a slightly more ambiguous case, the “SM2” and

“SM3” schemes, which come with the “bond” attached, explicitly intend to incorporate the “PRC scholars” into Singapore’s future citizenry. Thus, whether or not scholars abide by their obligations often turns up as a contentious issue. The author’s field observation suggests that the vast majority of “PRC scholars” do indeed initially stay and work in Singapore after graduation. In any event, after having been educated in Singapore for a number of years, these scholars’ social networks and resources are primarily located in the city-state, and hence staying and working in Singapore constitutes an obvious choice for most of them. Having said this, it must be acknowledged that the picture is more complicated. Although most “PRC scholars” initially remain in Singapore to seek employment, several years down the road, due to career development, personal circumstances and other factors, undoubtedly some will have left Singapore, without necessarily having completed the total of six years’ “service” that is expected of them. For these young, cosmopolitan-minded and often very ambitious professionals, they tend to believe that they should choose life trajectories that best suit their own interests, whether these be defined in relation to career or family or otherwise. Furthermore, still in their mid- or late 20s, the future for them appears as exciting as it is unpredictable. Given good opportunities, the scholar-graduates would usually not hesitate to pursue work or study outside Singapore, although the chance that they would ultimately return to Singapore after such ventures is perhaps as good as the chance of them not returning. In short, two, three or four years after graduation, the number of PRC scholar-graduates who leave Singapore certainly increases. Contra Yeoh and Lin’s (2013) opinion that the Singapore state has no viable means to police the scholars’ whereabouts (p. 40), this author believes a more plausible explanation is that the Singapore authorities simply recognize that it is unfeasible to strictly require the PRC scholar-graduates to spend six consecutive years in Singapore. Hence, although the “foreign talent” scholarship schemes appear as clear-cut contractual relationships, the reality often involves more ambiguity and complexity.

Such ambiguity and complexity is, however, typically not sympathized with by Singaporeans, not a few of whom frame the issue as a question of “loyalty.” A persistent strain of opinion has developed in recent times, namely that the scholars have no loyalty towards Singapore, and they opportunistically use it as a “stepping-stone” to somewhere supposedly better, such as the West. Comments

voicing this cynical perception and suspicion can be readily found in many online discussion forums and occasionally also in mainstream print media (e.g., Koh, 1997, September 4). In one striking instance, according to *The Straits Times* (Teo, 2004, October 22), a Singaporean youth was reported to have said the following regarding the “foreign talent” scholars: “I can’t help feeling that we’re being used. Is there some way of making these foreign scholars stay in Singapore after receiving our education?”

The academic ambitiousness that is characteristic of many Chinese student-scholars often drives them to desire postgraduate education in Western institutions that are more prestigious than the Singaporean ones; the conditionality of the scholarships is thus sometimes complained of as a limitation on their ambitions or potentials. Such views when voiced easily reinforce the local society’s suspicion over the scholars’ loyalty or attachment to Singapore, and strengthen the “stepping-stone” thesis.

Moral Character

While the contractual bond signifies *legal* obligation, loyalty is also often understood by the Singaporeans to be something more, i.e., as a *moral* obligation on the part of the scholars. Indeed, the discourses of suspicion about scholars often carry palpable moral overtones, questioning whether the “foreign talents” are morally upright subjects deserving the honors and privileges they have been accorded. To scholars who leave Singapore without serving their “bond” or without at least deferring their service to a later stage, the damning expression “bond-breaker” is often applied. Bond-breakers are spoken of as ingrates and, in worse cases, as “thieves” who steal Singaporean tax-payers’ money that funded their education.

The negative perceptions in Singapore society over Chinese immigrants more generally, such as the stereotypes of Chinese young women as prostitutes or mistresses (e.g., Ho, 2003) or of low-skilled male Chinese workers as aggressive and dishonest, can have an unconscious “spill-over” effect, influencing people’s imaginations of the “PRC scholars” too. This is exacerbated by the fact that over the past decade, there have been several cases of anti-social verbal abuse involving students/scholars from China making derogatory or downright insulting comments about Singapore or Singaporeans (see Yeoh & Lin, 2013). To

those in Singapore who are already prejudiced against the Chinese students/scholars, such cases confirm their suspicion over the moral quality and desirability of these “foreign talents,” whereas people who defend them typically cast off these as “individual cases” not representative of the whole. This author contends that, though certainly not being a major factor, one reason why some PRC students/scholars fail to show appreciation for their new host country and people was the fact that they encounter subtle prejudices in the first place.

Academic Caliber

Concurrent with a tendency in which the phrase “foreign talent” is increasingly used by many Singaporeans to refer to any immigrant worker or foreign student rather than strictly-speaking those in possession of high skill levels or prestigious scholarships, a suspicion over the quality and academic caliber of the scholars also developed. The fact that “PRC scholars” were chosen primarily based on their academic strengths in science and mathematics means that many of them tend to be relatively weak in language-based disciplines or, in the first instance, in daily English communication. Their comparatively poor command of English is liable to give host Singaporeans the impression that they are academically inadequate, and thus undeserving of the scholarships with which they have been bestowed. This strain of suspicion also gets reflected in some of the letters members of the public wrote to *The Straits Times*. For example, Wong (2001, August 21) warned that “we must not be blinded into thinking that foreign talent means superior talent” because otherwise “we may end up getting third-rate foreigners who come here because they are not doing well in their own countries.” This was echoed by another reader, Wee (2001, November 7), who called those substandard foreign talents “liabilities, not assets” to Singapore. In 2011, a reader’s letter which was aggressively entitled “Keep out the less talented among foreign students” (Oh, 2011, August 24) suggests that “the sentiment persists that Singapore offers sponsorship to too many foreign students of average calibre.”

Mundane Prejudices

Aside from these prejudices that are related to Singapore society’s general

anxieties over “foreign talent,” the “PRC scholars” are not exempted from classic forms of social disconnect and discriminations that are typically found in international students’ experiences, as outlined earlier in the literature review. Notwithstanding the fact that Singapore is an ethnically Chinese-majority society, the cultural and linguistic gaps are sufficiently wide for the “PRC scholars” to feel disconnected and sometimes excluded. For instance, Singaporean students’ pervasive use of “Singlish”—a unique local colloquial version of English with flexible grammar structures and a liberal deployment of various Chinese dialect and Malay vocabularies—often marginalizes Chinese students socially in the university campus, particularly in relation to extra-curricular activities. Interestingly, while cultural and linguistic affinities no doubt help the “PRC scholars’ ” adjustment in Singapore to some extent, sometimes they also work against it. For instance, some of my informants mentioned that they felt their Chinese accents, sometimes tinged with Chinese regional/dialect influences, were found to be “funny” or “disturbing” by some Singaporeans. A more common pitfall, however, is when the PRC students judge their Singaporean counterparts’ ability to speak Mandarin to be woefully inadequate. Furthermore, some Chinese scholars’ bookish disposition makes them seem anti-social or socially incompetent, while others’ preference to stay in their own comfort zones makes “ghettoization” still an observable phenomenon. Many “PRC scholars” barely have Singaporeans whom they could comfortably call “friends.”

Despite all these, it must be acknowledged that serious forms of discrimination, such as those hostile experiences reported in contexts where the international students are the targets of racist abuses, are virtually unheard of in Singapore with regard to the PRC scholars. On the whole, Singapore proves to be an environment the “PRC scholars” find relatively easy to adjust to, and they experience considerably less insecurity or vulnerability compared to Chinese students venturing to Western destinations; but this “soft landing” is also sometimes precisely the reason why some of them feel little incentive to deeply engage with local Singapore society and people.

Predicament

Privilege and prejudice can blend to make a conflicted brew—a predicament. The fact that the Singapore government went out of its way to recruit these “PRC

scholars” may have the inadvertent effect of creating a sense of entitlement among the scholars. Hence, when feeling unwelcome in the Singapore society, they might develop the perception that they are given a “rougher deal” than they had been previously promised. Furthermore, as the initial excitement and enriching experiences associated with coming to study in a more advanced foreign country gradually wear off, the negative implications of having committed themselves to being “foreign talent” in Singapore become more pronouncedly felt.

The revelation that Singapore does not live up to the image of a “purely” English-speaking environment makes some Chinese student-scholars downgrade the prestige and desirability of Singapore vis-à-vis *white* Anglophone countries, which are still symbolically the most coveted destinations for aspiring Chinese students. The real or perceived distances in terms of educational/research qualities between the Singaporean higher education institutions and those revered institutions of North America and Europe may cause some scholars to regret having come to Singapore because they retrospectively believe that, had they stayed in China, they would eventually gain admission to those revered institutions as graduate students. The scholarship “bond” turns into a real or perceived obstacle for those academically oriented scholars who wish to immediately pursue postgraduate education after obtaining the first degree. The stronger the desire for the world outside Singapore, the stronger a sense of predicament; the most ambitious scholars may feel as if they have been “trapped,” although it must be said that scholars who strongly feel so are in a rather small minority.

The sense of predicament that is observed among some scholars may in fact be attributed back to the very fact that they have been chosen as “foreign talent” in the first place. Coming to Singapore have made most of them more ambitious, and have helped them explore and develop their passions and desires. In other words, their desires have been re-educated. For example, the “SM1” scheme—by integrating the scholars into Singapore’s high-quality English-medium secondary education—opens for them the doors to top universities in the world. Thus, although these scholars might have ended up studying in good universities in China had they not come to Singapore, now that they already have “A levels” from the best Singaporean junior colleges, they consider staying in Singapore and going to the local universities, which rank higher than virtually all

universities in China, a frankly inferior outcome. Similar scenarios may apply to the "SM2" and "SM3" scholars who, by accepting the scholarships, commit themselves to studying science and engineering disciplines at university but later realize that their real interests lie elsewhere. Once the scholars' ambitions and desires have been incited and nurtured by the "foreign talent" schemes and their eyes opened by living in Singapore, the very privileges they have enjoyed may ironically come to feel restricting and unfulfilling, and consequently a source of predicament.

At a more mundane level, it is stressful if also somewhat monotonous urban life style makes Singapore a "boring" and unattractive social milieu, especially to those "PRC scholars" who are not successful in developing extensive local social networks. Even factors such as climate, food and other small aspects of the texture of living may affect the Chinese scholars' levels of satisfaction and happiness in settling down in this Southeast Asian island-state. When these elements inopportunely add up to make some "PRC scholars" grumble about the situation that they are in, it is little wonder that some Singaporeans find them ungrateful to Singapore in view of the privileges that have been showered on them.

Conflicted feelings are also experienced in the context of campus life and daily interactions with the host population. Echoing what is reported in the wider literature on international students' experience, the "PRC scholars" also demonstrate desires to make meaningful contact with their local peers. However, factors such as language and background continue to make such contact fraught with tension and failure. The nationalistic ideology that many Chinese students to greater or lesser extent embody makes their communications with Singaporeans of Chinese ethnicity potentially risky, as the perceived "inauthentic" Chinese-ness of the Singaporeans becomes an opportunity for the "PRC scholars" to achieve symbolic dominance (cf., Lee, 2007). It should be stressed, however, that such nationalistic tendencies are not to be understood solely as the result of the scholars' education in China, but also as a mechanism of defense against real or perceived prejudice or discrimination from Singaporeans (Yang, *in press*).

Despite the senses of predicament and frustration that are experienced by some "PRC scholars" in Singapore, however, it is important not to lose sight of the positive side of the picture. Many of these above mentioned conflicted and struggling sentiments turn out to be expressions of uncertainties about life in

general that many young adults experience at their college years, regardless of the specific social contexts. As the “PRC scholars” gradually mature and put things in retrospect, these experiences transpire to be part and parcel of their journeys of self-transformation and maturation. One small but instructive example revolves around the scholars’ being regarded as “very China” (Yang, 2014b), certainly prejudice and discrimination are involved, but it is interesting to see how the scholars themselves speak of their self-transformative experiences through the idiom of “very China”-ness. For the “PRC scholars,” the self-consciousness of being “very China” marks their moment of encountering the cultural “other” and achieving self-awareness. By overcoming their perceivedly undesirable old selves, they develop more cosmopolitan and well-rounded subjectivities and sensibilities. Although this process may have initially been somewhat painful, scholars also derive a powerful sense of agency and achievement through this experience.

Concluding Remarks

As China’s economy continues to rise and the country becomes more tightly integrated into the processes of globalization, Chinese citizens’ global mobilities today also take on increasingly diverse forms and patterns. One major form consists in the educational mobilities that have resulted from, among other factors, the emergence of a massive affluent urban class, the Chinese society’s strong emphasis on education (Kipnis, 2011), and the intense competition in the domestic labor market. Chinese students and scholars abroad have thus become a prominent feature in the world’s educational and social landscapes. Recognizing the enormous diversity to this population and their sojourning experiences in various parts of the world, in this *overview* account, the author has attempted to shed some light on one piece of the mosaic that has rarely been studied so far: the Chinese “foreign talent” student-scholars in Singapore.

While this account has accentuated the more problematic aspects of these subjects’ experiences in order to engage with the hotly debated “foreign talent” issue in the Southeast Asian city-state, it ought to be emphasized that, for most of Chinese student-immigrants who settle in Singapore through “foreign talent” scholarship schemes, their experiences are by and large positive. The author encountered few “PRC scholars” who said they truly regretted choosing the

unique path they have taken. As time goes by, and as many “PRC scholars” become new “Singaporeans” and develop some senses of attachment to their newly adopted home, the balance tips again: Feelings of privilege may eventually outweigh those in relation to prejudice and predicament. The challenge remains, however, for the local Singaporean society to better understand and accept these new settlers in their midst. This paper is a small step towards taking on this challenge.

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