Teaching in Australia: Chinese university teachers talk about how they found teaching jobs in Australia

Lu Jiang, Central Queensland University and Richard Smith, Southern Cross University, Australia

This article is about how a group of Chinese academics ended up teaching and researching in Australia. To explain their educational journeys since 1949, the chapter surveys (1) the chaotic end of China’s Cultural Revolution; (2) Deng Xiaoping’s “Open Up” policies; (3) the high school exit examination (GaoKao) and university entry availability; (4) the development of English language capability; (5) opportunities for Chinese scholars to go abroad; and (6) academic careers in China. The material is largely drawn from interviews conducted by one of the authors (Lu) with Chinese participants and English and Chinese literature sources. This chapter shows how socio-historical circumstances opened educational opportunities for Chinese people in the post-Mao period that enabled them to become transnational knowledge workers. The chapter concludes that despite facing significant personal and professional adjustments in order to gain permanent positions in a ‘foreign’ regional university, these academics represent the potential impact on Australian institutions of the Chinese intellectual diaspora.
Introduction and conceptual background

Chinese history has undergone chaotic changes in its social, political, cultural and economic areas since the founding of the People’s Republic of China was announced by Mao Zedong. The People’s Republic of China led by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) propelled the Chinese people into national social experiments, the scale of which was unmatched in the history of humankind. The Great Leap Forward campaign in 1958-60, the social turmoil of the Great Proletariat Cultural Revolution during the ten-year period of 1966-1976, and the enormous economic transition from a centrally planned economy towards a market-oriented socialist economy in the post-1978 period signify the enormous challenges met by the Chinese nation. These movements in China’s national development were characterized by big policy changes that affected millions and intense political and economic arguments in the ruling elite. They were also associated with impressive successes and devastating failures that had enormous impacts on the fabric of society, most notably the great famines of the early 1960s and the Cultural Revolution.

The Cultural Revolution Period (1966-1976)

The Cultural Revolution was initiated by Mao Zedong in 1966 and lasted until his death in September 1976. It was a political and cultural campaign on a national scale aimed at ridding China of bourgeois influences and confirming Mao’s power against his nationalist competitors and those in the Party vying for leadership (OECD, 2011). Symbols of bourgeois culture, such as music, drama, novels and opera were criticised and destroyed to ensure that rural and urban proletariat ideology had priority (OECD, 2011). Intellectuals were the most susceptible to attack in the Cultural Revolution period (OECD, 2011).

The closure of formal schools and institutions during the Cultural Revolution affected education greatly. “Although most primary schools continued to operate as usual, almost all secondary and tertiary level institutions were shut down completely from 1966-68 and most tertiary level institutions remained closed until 1972” (Bernstein, 1977; Unger 1982, as cited in Deng & Treiman, 1997, p. 400). Universities did not have normal student recruitment during the Cultural Revolution period and consequently, there were effects on the formal education of whole generations of young people (Deng & Treiman, 1997). In a strong sense, over this period, China’s educational system was destroyed and it had to be reconstructed in the late 1970s and early 1980s (OECD, 2011).

The year of 1976 in China was disastrous: Zhou Enlai, a former premier, died in January 1976 and Mao Zedong, the first generation leader, died in September of the same year. Hua Guofeng nominated by Mao Zedong as his successor, assumed power after Mao’s death in October 1976. Hua and his followers arrested The Gang of Four (四人帮Si Ren Bang), the name given to a political faction composed of four Chinese Communist Party officials Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, Wang Hongwen and Mao Zedong’s last wife Jiang Qing, the leading figure of the group. They came to prominence during the Cultural Revolution and were subsequently charged with treason (Hsu, 1990). Hua and his followers finally brought the Cultural Revolution to an end.

The Era of Deng Xiaoping after 1978

The then leadership of the CPP criticized Deng Xiaoping’s tactics for economic and social reforms before Mao’s death. In 1977 Deng Xiaoping had come back from the political wilderness to which he was assigned for a while before Mao died (Baum, 1994). In December 1978, during the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee Congress of the Communist Party of China Deng Xiaoping
took over the reins of power (Baum, 1994). Deng, the second-generation leader of the CCP, with his acquaintances launched the reforming the revolution movement.

Under this initiative, the land contract with individual (包产到户 Bao Chan Dao Hu) was established. This “simple and effective land reform policy” was first started at Anhui province and then nationwide proved to be an efficient way to stimulate the peasant’s passion for “increasing productivity” (Ma, 2003, p. 2). Notably, one of Deng Xiaoping’s greatest accomplishments was to focus the CCP on economic construction (Baum, 1994). Researchers such as Baum (1994), Deng and Treiman (1997) and Ma (2003) agree that this was a landmark period in China’s history, lifting the curtain for a period of reform and the opening up of China. In one of the author’s (Lu) experience as a high school student in the period of 1978-1979, the whole of China at that time moved into a totally different era compared to Mao’s times.

Deng emphasized that he wanted to change the primary focus from politics to economics in order to provide China with positive economic benefits. Foreign individuals and businesses were encouraged to invest and stimulate the country’s economy following the ‘Open Door Policy’ (Ma, 2003). The Chinese Economic Reform (改革开放 Gai Ge Kai Fang), referred to the program of economic reforms called Socialism with Chinese characteristics, was commenced in December 1978 by reformists within the CCP led by Deng Xiaoping. Deng created a new era for the national development of China since then. Officially, Deng decided to retire from top positions when he stepped down as Chairman of the Central Military Commission in 1989, and retired from political scene in 1992. After his death in 1997, China continued its reform and opening up policies under the leadership of Jiang Zemin (1989-2002), the third generation leader, Hu Jintao (2003-2012), the fourth generation leader, and Xi Jinping (elected in November 2012), the fifth generation leader.

**Iron Rice Bowl**

Correspondingly, in the industrial segment, “a reform was first started in employment and personal management by smashing the so called Iron Rice Bowl in the early 1980s” (Ma, 2003, p. 2). Iron Rice Bowl (铁饭碗) is a Chinese term used to refer to an occupation with guaranteed job security, as well as steady income and benefits (Ma, 2003). It is a metaphor used to indicate employment in the military, as a member of the civil service, as well as in various state-run enterprises. Whether one performed well or not, the position was secure forever like an iron bowl that was very solid. “The Iron Rice Bowl, though not a scientific term, refers to national arrangements for the provision of jobs and employment security in such a way that workers were safeguarded from the anxieties of unemployment and job seeking” (Fung, 2001, p. 259).

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping began to transform China from a centrally planned economy to a free-market model, “whereby the collectively owned sector and the private sector were allowed to recruit workers to absorb the excessive supply of urban labour” (Fung, 2001, p. 263). Since then, high position administrators have been given the right of hiring and firing especially in the “industry, business and education” sectors (Ma, 2003, p. 3). This was quite a new development and the policy resulted in “the decentralization of decision-making in a traditionally centrally planned industry” (Ma, 2003, p. 3). These political events affected generations of Chinese people who grew up in these special times. The same events had significant implications for the participants in this research.
National College Entrance Examination the GaoKao

Deng Xiaoping restored the National College Entrance Examination (the GaoKao高考) in early 1977. The GaoKao (高考), literally meaning high examination, was regarded as the baton of the whole educational system, especially for transition from the schools into university. Hannum, Xue and Cherng (2011, p. 267) state that “the GaoKao results play an important role in determining transitions to tertiary education and in determination the type of education received”. Opportunities to attend universities or colleges were based on academic merit as indicated by the GaoKao examination. This corrected a situation where some students whose family members who had previously been landlords or capitalists with political connections were banned from sitting for the university entrance examination (Li, Dray-Novey & Kong, 2007). The GaoKao was vividly and metaphorically described as millions of soldiers trying to cross a one-log bridge (千军万马过独木桥) especially in the late 1970s and 1980s as it was the only standard test for Chinese students nationwide (Li et al., 2007).

It is widely believed by parents and students in China that getting a degree from universities with good reputations brings a better job and eventually a better life (Li, 2001). Key national universities (重点大学) are those that are considered to be the most prestigious and are charged with awarding Master and Doctoral degrees to China’s educational elite (Deng & Treiman, 1997). Project 211 and Project 985 universities are widely regarded to be the most prestigious in China (Li, 2001).

Every family and student is concerned about the National College Entrance Examination because it has such great importance in a student’s life and future. The GaoKao is regarded as the door to the future for the young students (Li, 2001). They are the most sought after by higher education institutions and the goal of entering such institutions motivates students and families alike as children and their education are perhaps the top priority of every Chinese family.

The development of English language capability

Wang and Gao (2008, p. 386) state that “the spread of English is widely seen as linked to dramatic social and political changes in China”. During the Cultural Revolution period, those who had English language skills were labelled bourgeois and suffered oppression. Knowing Western languages, apart from Russian, was a sensitive political issue in the period of Cultural Revolution because of Chinese Communist Party policies towards the Western world.

During the Opening Up, attending top schools and achieving success in the examination system became available. The opportunity to learn English in that period was mandated by the Ministry of Education and provided by the school and university curriculum where the participants were educated. By doing so, national development trends and English made China more accessible to global influences and increased the capacity of individual Chinese to participate in the global economy of ideas and labour force (Wang & Gao, 2008).

With the accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the ability to communicate in a foreign language, particularly English is now emphasized in universities and colleges. In the early years of the open-door policy, English was a minor subject in the GaoKao, but by the mid-1990s, English was one of the three key subjects (in addition to Mathematics and Chinese) in the GaoKao. English is now a second language for most Han Chinese and a third language for minority Chinese
as they learn Mandarin as their second language according to Lam (2007a & 2007b, as cited in Wang & Gao, 2008, p. 383). This adds to the linguistic complexity of China where “…China is a multilingual and multidialectal context with 56 ethnic groups, among which the Han Chinese speak Mandarin besides their local dialects and the 55 minority groups speak as many as 80-120 languages” (Lam, 2005, as cited in Wang & Gao, 2008, p. 383).

Before 1978, English was not influential. After 1978, there was a passion for learning English exemplified by the Teach Yourself English programmes on Television such as Follow Me, the BBC English learning program, and broadcast by China Central Television in the early 1980s. As China opened up more and Chinese scholars were allowed to go overseas for study or research, the need for both social and academic English became obvious to students and intellectuals though not everyone was intent on going abroad. Learning English at that time was a window on the outside world.

By the 1990s a greater understanding and knowledge of English had begun to play an important role in academic and professional development for Chinese people (Kang, 1999). It remains today as it did then. Nevertheless, many university students from the countryside in the late 1970s and the early 1980s had few opportunities to learn English at high school even though English was a formal prerequisite subject for passing the GaoKao and entry into a Bachelor’s degree. Participants had to commit to learning English under unfavourable conditions as part of their GaoKao preparation (Wang & Gao, 2008).

English has been a two-year compulsory course in the universities. The College English Test (CET 4-6) is the standard test to check student competence while at university. English has been one of the required subjects to enter postgraduate degrees. Since the 1990s, English language, as well as Japanese, Russian and French, has been a test subject for those academics seeking promotion to higher academic titles.

After China officially became a member in The World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 (Prime, 2002), and the Reform & Opening Policy was implemented more widely, the value of international communications in all domains become a high priority. English, as an important tool for cross-cultural communication, has greater status compared to other available languages. People in China have been aware of this trend and have developed ways to take advantage of it (Wang & Gao, 2008).

Scholars and students with English skills were sent overseas
In January 1979, Deng Xiaoping undertook an official visit to the United States during which he met President Jimmy Carter in Washington and several congressmen. After Deng’s visit to the United States, many young Chinese went to study abroad (Ma, 2003). It became widely acknowledged that the better your English competency, the better your chances to go abroad or to study or work overseas. Thus learning English has taken on a special significance in China.

Part of the national development plan was to upgrade research levels in China’s major universities and research institutes. The China Scholarship Council (CSC), set up in 1996, is a non-profit institution with legal person status affiliated with the Ministry of Education (Yao, 2004). The aim of CSC is to provide financial assistance for Chinese citizens to study abroad and for foreign citizens to study in China in the light of the law and relevant principles and policies of China. CSC is funded mostly by the state’s special appropriations for scholarship programmes. According to
official statistics, the CSC, established in 1996, sent 78,524 scholars to abroad between the years of 1996-2009 (Yao, 2004).

The CSC sponsors two groups of Chinese people: (1) visiting scholars and (2) students. Visiting scholars do some research and study abroad for a certain period of time, normally 3 months, 6 months or 12 months in overseas universities or research institutions. The aims are for visiting scholars to go overseas to improve their research ability in their field, but not for obtaining an academic degree (Yao, 2004). In contrast, students offered opportunities to study abroad by CSC are those who intend to achieve degree qualifications such as Bachelors, Masters or PhDs.

By way of drawing this conversation together, it has been established that the reform and development of China’s educational establishment especially over the past three decades have been integral to China’s political, economic and social modernization. It is clear that post-Mao, the increase in the scale of Chinese education has provided opportunities for more students to progress through the system to higher education and entry into professions. In the early stages, degree and career choice were somewhat limited by the exigencies of economic development. The emergence of English as a favoured language in trade, communication and education has also created unprecedented opportunities for graduates and professionals to imagine and then achieve, study opportunities and work potential beyond China. These socio-historical factors are irrevocably linked to the careers of Chinese academics who progressed through the system during these years.

In the next section, we provide a more detailed discussion of how these influences framed the educational and academic journeys of a sample of Chinese academic working in Australia.

**Research Outcomes**
The data that are discussed in the remainder of the chapter are drawn from a Masters study conducted by one of the authors, Lu (2013). She undertook a qualitative multiple-case design study of nine Chinese academics presently employed by an Australia regional university (X) in full academic appointments. Using structured interviews in English and Mandarin she generated themes about what constitutes a Chinese “Educational Journey” to a regional university for her participants. Her research strongly asserted the definitive impact that the post-Mao period had on these people.

Lu identified a number of themes. In the following discussion, eight of these are discussed to show the connections between the recent history of the Chinese nation and the present day circumstances of the sample of Chinese academics.

**Starting the educational journey**
Six of the nine participants went to school when they were six years old, two of the nine were seven years old, and one was five and a half years old. They all went to the primary schools located where they were born in rural and city locations. All of the schools were public schools either in cities or the countryside.

All participants went to public secondary schools and one attended a top-rated public secondary school. Top schools in a city or town at the secondary level refer to those schools that have good reputations and high enrolment rates of the GaoKao. The participants finished secondary school
and passed the GaoKao examination. Six of the nine participants went to Project 211 universities and three to a Normal University.

Olsen (2009, p. 10) reports, “the Chinese government is responsible for regulating the number of university graduates based on the economic and social needs of the country”. Olsen (2009, p. 13) also highlights that “universities, colleges and vocational institutions, private colleges and joint foreign programs are categorised under Tiers for the purpose of university entrance via the GaoKao” in China. Furthermore, “these national and provincial university recruitment plans are targeted so that the top percentage of GaoKao candidates are eligible for admission to Tier One universities and the next 20 percentage of candidates are eligible for admission to Tier Two universities” (Olsen, 2009, p. 5). Accordingly, when the participants applied for university entry and particular majors, the eligibility for admission to Tier One and Tier Two universities depended on their score on the GaoKao report.

**The English language**

To reiterate, the uptake and spread of English was linked to the post Cultural Revolution period of social and political change under Deng (Wang & Gao, 2008). The participants’ educational journeys straddled this period.

Those participants who entered university during the late 1970s were not required to have English proficiency prior to the GaoKao and began learning English at university. Comments from the participants indicate that learning English required effort and that to continue with an academic career it was important to know English. From the experience of the participants in this study it is possible to track the introduction of English language as a school subject. During the 1970s students were exposed to English at university for the first time. During the 1980s English was introduced to the high school curriculum. By the 1990s English was being taught at primary school.

It could be argued here that the gradual implementation of English into the primary and secondary schools was part of the revitalisation of the education system (Gu, 2011) plus a way of expanding the higher education system by encouraging students to learn English, which was a compulsory subject for the GaoKao. While for some of the participants, English language was part of the usual school pattern, for those who entered university at the end of the Cultural Revolution much more personal effort was needed to gain proficiency in speaking and understanding English.

**Starting university in China**

All participants passed the GaoKao and started university in the following years: 1978, 1979, 1982, 1986, 1992, 1998, and 2002. Three participants went to university during the 1970s, three during the 1980s and the last three were at university more recently around the turn of the century. This means that all of the participants would have had different experiences. For example three entered university at the end of the Cultural Revolution while one started university twenty-three years later.

Six participants attended Project 211 universities (some of those universities also hold the title of Project 985); three participants went to Normal Universities (which train students to become teachers). Most participants regarded their universities as “top” universities in China.
These remarks reveal that all of the participants had successful GaoKao results that enabled them to attend nine different universities. Three were at university at the same time as Deng Xiaoping came to power and a new direction in economic development was being implemented (Baum, 1994). During the 1980s there was an emphasis on teacher education and maintaining high standards for teachers and secondary school education (Hayhoe & Li, 2010) thus seeing an improvement in the status of Normal Universities.

**Being a student at university**

Obviously some participants chose those majors in which they were interested or which were popular in the context of the social and economic development of China from 1978. More broadly, the Chinese higher education system expanded to assist in the modernisation of the country and was seen as the vehicle to economic growth (Ngok, 2007). Over a period of thirty years students going onto higher education have progressed through a system where choice of majors was determined by the university that synchronised with key messages from government. It is only recently that students can choose their lines of study. All nine participants spoke of their choice of majors as having been influenced by some factors that reflected China’s economic goals.

**Changing financial support for university study in China**

Those participants, who attended university in the late 1970s and early 1980s, did not have scholarships, but they received government financial support and free tuition. According to Ma (2003), because of the restricted number of universities and therefore students, higher education was free to everyone lucky enough to pass the GaoKao and get to university. Since the 1990s, the Higher Education system has moved from an elitist model to a more mass education system and has seen a change in student fees from being supported by the government to being supported by parents.

Government financial support, living allowances and scholarships were available to these participants at different times according to China’s educational policy. For example, participants who went to universities in the late 1970s and early 1980s had total sponsorship from the government to help them through their higher education period. Participants who went to universities in the years of 1990s and 2000s were awarded scholarships.

**Working in Chinese Universities**

All participants were successful in gaining Bachelor degrees at different universities in China. All but one of the participants has a PhD: four were gained in China, four in Australia and one in another Asian country. Four of the nine participants achieved Postdoctoral fellowship programs in Australia. This pattern is an example of what Appadurai (1996) calls cultural flows and changing scapes. The following table shows the academic appointments of these nine participants after graduation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ID</th>
<th>Levels of teaching in China</th>
<th>Years of teaching in China</th>
<th>Previous academic experiences in China</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

1 These names are pseudonyms
Table 1 shows all participants had academic careers before coming to Australia. Four of the nine participants had worked for 10 years or more before making the move from China. The nine participants are skilled and experienced university staff members, based on what counts as academic work experience in the Australian model in the higher education sector. Their academic work experiences and PhD qualifications enabled them to apply for and obtain work in research and teaching at the Australian university. It can be argued that the career pathways taken by all the participants document educational journeys that show them as moving nationally, globally and internationally thus making them an example of transnational academic mobility (Koser & Salt, 1997; Kim, 2009; Guerin & Green, 2009).

In summary, gaining qualifications in the 1980s in prestigious Chinese universities enabled four of the participants to become lecturers. Participants with Masters or PhD degrees in the 1990s and 2000s had more choices than those in the 1980s due to the changes of government policy. Their educational journeys and historical circumstances with combined career prospects improved and in the social and political context of China during this time enabled the participants to travel to Australia for further study or employment.

**Gaining work in Australian academic environments**

The academic experiences of nine participants can be divided into five groups. Four of the nine participants obtained their PhD degrees in China and worked as researchers or lecturers in the current university. One participant came to do research work and joined a PhD program in an Australian university. Two participants came to Australia and joined PhD programs in Australia and then were appointed as lecturers. One participant obtained an academic appointment after completed a Master’s degree in Australia. One participant completed a Masters and PhD degree outside China and Australia and was then appointed as a lecturer.

During the intervening thirty years mainly influenced by the Open Door policy and the desire to modernise China there have been many changes and opportunities for those Chinese who want to
pursue an academic career. However despite having internationally recognised qualifications changing countries and different educational systems does provide challenges for the participants.

**Challenges while working at the current university**

All participants have had different challenges at work even though they have similar educational qualifications to other Australian academics. The participants in the study consistently highlighted that the main professional challenge was with the teaching delivery expected at regional University X.

The main drivers for coming to Australia were to take up opportunities to go overseas and to do research as part of an international group. Five participants have lived in Australia for over 10 years. Most of that time has been spent in the local community where they are working. Three have been employed by their current university for 10 years; two for around 5 years; two for 2 years; and, two for 1 year. Most of them have families in the local community. Their academic positions, and the fact that their families like living in the local community are the two factors that keep them working in their current university.

In addition to the challenges of a new workplace the participants pointed to other significant aspects of their more general experiences in Australia. Issues with personal, cultural and social networks, often associated with depression, accompanied their careers in a regional Australian university.

Despite the initial difficulties, the adjustment to Regional University X has been successful for the participants. According to the participants it has been indicated that making the transition to Australia was made possible through supportive colleagues both in China and in Australia. The participants’ educational journeys are closely related to the changing environment of educational and economic policy both in China and Australia. The politics of research and education in the higher education sector have influenced in how they adjusted to regional University X.

The main findings of Lu’s study are recognisable as international phenomena. The participants follow the general pattern set out by Koser and Salt (1997, p. 293) in that they belong to a group of people recognised as highly skilled labour who found opportunities from the restructuring of the world economy. In the Australian setting they are a new element of the global division of labour, offered by the movement of expertise that is emerging in universities (Hugo, 2008b). As the data show, these Chinese academics are highly skilled with the characteristics of mobility, and identified as definitive of transnational skilled migration in the terms used by Hugo (2004, p. 73).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter we have presented findings drawn from the reported experiences of Chinese academics working at an Australian regional university. Eight participants in this study started work at Chinese universities after completing their tertiary education at different higher degree levels. Those participants who were academic lecturers took advantage of Chinese government educational policies in the early to late 1980s. All participants recognized and then pursued opportunities to undertake higher degree study or to work both in China and Australia. Gaining higher degrees and having previous work experience helped these participants find academic positions at the current university. All of them found adjustment to the Australian university system, language and culture difficult but not insurmountable. Regardless of whether they
commenced their careers early or late, there are many similarities in participants’ academic experiences while working at the present university.
References


