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Waiting After Mobility: Returnee Students and the New Waithood

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Abstract. In recent years, the destinations of Chinese students returning from studying abroad have become a topic of much discussion. This article takes "waithood" as the core concept and discusses the new waiting state of Chinese students who have returned from studying abroad after completing their overseas education. Through the literature review, combined with the research on waithood, the identity of international students and the flow of social relationships, as well as the changes in the domestic job market, this article analyzes why international students enter this new type of waithood after returning to their home countries. Moreover, the article also explores the "self-rescue methods" of international students in response to this situation. They will transform waiting into a new lifestyle through means such as exam preparation, temporary employment, or the Internet. The paper finds that the waithood experienced by returning international students is not simply caused by personal confusion or personal failure, but is shaped by the gap between international mobility and actual social mobility. Contemporary young people are also encouraged to constantly improve themselves to adapt to this social trend.

Keywords: waithood, returnee students, social mobility, overseas education, underemployment

1. Introduction

In modern society, with the improvement of people's living standards, in addition to the original wealthy families, an increasing number of middle-class families have also begun to have the economic conditions to send their children abroad. Studying abroad has gradually become a means for middle-class families in China to pursue high-quality educational resources and move up to higher social mobility. For the vast majority of families, overseas academic qualifications seem to be directly equated with positive employment outcomes such as strong competitiveness and high salaries. However, such a trend has directly led to a sharp increase in the number of international students and the saturation of the market for returning overseas students who are unemployed. Returning to China no longer automatically means a high-status job or stable economic independence. Returning international students gradually need to start dealing with harsh realities such as identity dislocation, unemployment or underemployment.

The concept of waithood can be used to analyze this current situation. For society as a whole, waithood is "a long-term period of suspension between childhood and adulthood." Honwana pointed

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out that young people in this state cannot fully achieve the signs of adulthood, such as stable employment, economic independence, and social recognition [1]. Cuzzocrea described the contradictions at this stage in more detail. Young people need to keep developing themselves to get better opportunities, but they are also required to get employed as soon as possible [2]. Masquelier also pointed out in his research that waiting is not merely a passive process. At this stage, young people can choose to lead a strategic life and seek ways out and opportunities [3].

This paper studies the new waithood experienced by Chinese returned students after completing their overseas education through the method of literature review. This article combines the study of waithood, social mobility, and migration, as well as the Chinese labor market, to analyze how the waithood of returned overseas students is shaped by the gap between international mobility and actual social mobility. This article holds that this state is not merely caused by personal confusion or failure, but rather is the result of the combined effect of structural factors, including identity misalignment, low employment, family expectations, and changes in the value of overseas academic qualifications. At the same time, returning international students are not completely passively waiting. They transform waiting into a strategic lifestyle through means such as exam preparation, temporary employment, self-improvement, and online self-presentation, and attempt to proactively and positively change their future.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theories of waithood

Honwana's definition and research on waithood can serve as an important theoretical basis for this case study. She pointed out that this was "a prolonged period of suspension between childhood and adulthood [1]." Young people are in a state full of uncertainties between adolescence and adulthood, feeling lost because they cannot be truly recognized by adult society. In terms of age, this group is beginning to be required by society to have the ability to handle affairs of adults, but psychologically they have not yet fully acquired the methods and experiences to master life. For returned overseas students, this waithood state is even more concrete and full of contradictions.

In *Moratorium* or *Waithood*, author Valentina Cuzzocrea reinforces the definition of waithood by comparing the two concepts. Compared with the moratorium, which is an allowed state of stagnation, waithood is more like a passive state caused by structural constraints. Young people do not freely choose to wait but are forced to delay their entry into adult status under the constraints of the job market, social systems, and economic pressures [2]. This point is particularly important for understanding returned overseas students. For many returned overseas students, the waiting period after coming back to China is not an active self-exploration, but rather a structural predicament jointly caused by employment competition, family investment pressure, and identity uncertainty.

Masquelier's research further shows that waiting is not always passive. Educated youth may organize their waithood through social interaction, information exchange, temporary work, and other daily practices [3]. Therefore, waiting can be understood as a "tactical mode of life," which helps this paper explain how returnee students transform waiting into self-rescue practices such as exam preparation, temporary employment, self-improvement, and online expression.

2.2. Social mobility and international mobility

The social mobility theory explored by Marzi in the literature is also an important perspective for analyzing waithood in this article. Marzi pointed out that the aspirations and spatial mobility of

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young people do not necessarily lead to upward social mobility. These international students achieved physical mobility in space when studying abroad, but this does not mean an increase in social class [4]. Meanwhile, during their study abroad, they will come into contact with people from different economic or social strata from themselves. This flow of space and environment will create the illusion of a leap in airport reception. It can be said that during the several years of studying abroad, the returned students have indeed completed their international mobility. However, whether such mobility can be transformed into stable employment, economic independence and social recognition is still restricted by family background, social capital, the job market and the structure of opportunities.

Liu's research on the "japa" phenomenon of Nigerian youth further indicates that migration is not only an ordinary spatial movement for many young people, but also might be an escape strategy when facing an uncertain future. "Japa" originally means "to run" or "to flee," and in the context of Nigerian youth, it is used to express the urgent desire to leave the country and seek a better future [5]. For Chinese students studying abroad, "japa" refers to using the option of studying overseas to seek better prospects for an uncertain future. For these young people and their families, going abroad means leaving the original competitive environment and seeking new opportunities. However, this paper finds that when young people complete their overseas mobility and return to their home country, they may not truly escape from uncertainty but enter a new waiting state.

2.3. Domestic employment situation of Chinese returnees

Hao and Welch conducted a case analysis on the employment of "Haigui" (Chinese returnees) in their literature. They pointed out that overseas academic qualifications had obvious advantages in the early stage of reform and opening up. However, with the increase in the number of international students and the improvement of the competitiveness and ability of local graduates, the advantage of overseas academic qualifications in the job market has gradually decreased. That is to say, in China, academic qualifications themselves no longer guarantee upward mobility [6]. Whether they are local graduates or returnees from overseas, they all have to confront an increasingly fierce job market. International students need to rely on their own efforts to transform their overseas educational background into a monetizable career advantage.

The article by Du, Sun and others offers a more balanced analysis of the employment issues of returned overseas students. They found that returnees with overseas postgraduate degrees may have certain income advantages compared to domestic postgraduates, but this advantage is not widespread. For those returning to China at the undergraduate level, an overseas degree does not necessarily bring obvious income, career choice or job advantages [7]. This indicates that the value of overseas education is uneven, which depends on the educational level, the quality of the school, human capital and the specific industry environment. Therefore, this article does not simply deny the value of studying abroad, but emphasizes that the benefits of international mobility are not stable and do not automatically translate into upward social mobility.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Seeking support: online communities and collective waithood

The new waithood experienced by Chinese returnees is first reflected in the contradiction between family investment and the reality of employment. Just as Honwana mentioned, "waithood involves a long process of negotiating personal identity and financial independence [1]." In addition to the

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confusion about identity, returned overseas students also have to face multiple economic pressures during the waithood period. For many middle-class people, the cost of studying abroad is a huge family investment. Besides tuition fees, the high rent and living costs in foreign countries are also taken into account. Parents usually hope that their children can obtain high-paying jobs, stable careers and higher social status after returning to their home country, thereby proving the value of this investment.

The misalignment of identity among international students is also one of the important reasons for waithood. During the years of living abroad, international students need to strive to adapt to a completely different social culture, rules and pace. But after returning to China, the previously familiar yet strange culture made a comeback. They have never fully belonged to foreign societies, and this rapid and brief international movement has weakened their sense of belonging and identity within the country. During the period of identity negotiation after returning to China, they need to recognize what the overseas study experience truly brings to them and how they will be treated and evaluated by society after their return.

When confronted with these economic, spatial and identity misalignments, Chinese returnees will also seek solutions just like young people in Nigeria. For instance, the Internet offers young people a new space for self-rescue. In the "Douban Hard Study Abroad Group" on Douban (the Chinese Reddit), many returned overseas students share their job-hunting experiences, low employment status and economic difficulties after returning to China. This is a discussion platform for waithood. Through online communication, international students not only receive emotional support but also share practical coping strategies, such as temporary jobs, part-time work or postgraduate entrance examination experiences.

In addition, there are also many highly-rated content on Zhihu discussing the value of overseas education upon returning to China. For instance, under the question "How difficult is it for overseas returnees to find jobs after returning to China?" a user who works as a headhunter classified overseas returnees into three categories: "Top-tier players," with both excellent academic qualifications and internship backgrounds; "Ordinary player," graduated from a university ranked 100-200 by QS, with average internship experience; "Water master's degree candidates" refer to those who rank lower and have only one year of postgraduate study experience. This classification indicates that the value of overseas academic qualifications in the domestic job market has not completely vanished but has become more stratified and conditional.

For "top-tier players," overseas academic qualifications, backgrounds from prestigious universities, internship experiences and personal abilities can be combined to help them enter their ideal industries more smoothly. However, for "ordinary players" or "water master players", overseas academic qualifications themselves are no longer sufficient to constitute a significant advantage. They need to make up for their lack of competitiveness by supplementing internship experiences, enhancing professional skills, accumulating project experience or pursuing further studies. This Zhihu case further proves that the waithood of returned overseas students is not merely due to the notion that "studying abroad is useless," but rather because the experience of studying abroad needs to be transformed into capital that the labor market can recognize. In other words, overseas education is more likely to be transformed into an employment advantage only when combined with academic qualifications, school reputation, internship experience and personal ability.

3.2. Self-rescue: tactical waiting and online self-presentation

In addition to seeking help online, a large number of accounts like "vlogs of overseas students' careers upon returning home" have emerged on the Internet nowadays. These accounts usually focus

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on documenting the job-hunting experiences, career explorations and life adjustments of returned overseas students, presenting in the form of short videos the process from low employment and low income to gradually finding satisfactory positions. Through this kind of self-presentation, international students not only share their personal experiences but also relieve psychological pressure to a certain extent and transform their own experiences into social capital or potential economic benefits. It seems that they are still in the stage of waithood, but in fact, they have already broken out of the predicament through the Internet and started a new type of work.

For example, a blogger named "yunaichuchu" on Chinese TikTok has all her vlog titles named "A Day of Leaving a Child, Returning to China, Unemployed, Lying Flat at Home, and Relying on Parents." Such videos seem to showcase her life of being passively in a waithood and not wanting to seek a way out, but she has gained nearly 200,000 followers with this video style and has turned the Internet into a career that can earn her money.

Internet platforms and self-media accounts provide an important strategic coping space for returned overseas students. In this space, students can engage in identity reshaping, information exchange, psychological adjustment and career exploration, making waihood not merely a passive wait but a social experience that can be actively managed and utilized.

4. Discussion

The cases of returned overseas students show that waihood is not merely a passive wait, but rather the result of the interweaving of structural restrictions and personal strategies. Overseas education offers spatial mobility and skill accumulation, but this international mobility does not automatically translate into domestic social mobility or economic independence. The saturation of the job market, family investment expectations and identity misalignment have caused young people to experience a delayed adulthood. However, they still proactively responded to waithood through exam preparation, temporary employment, self-improvement, and online self-presentation, thereby transforming waiting into strategic life practices.

This also indicates that waithood is both structural and proactive: structural factors lead to delayed employment, identity confusion, and economic pressure, while the proactive behavior of international students reflects their autonomous strategies and adaptability under limited conditions. The cases of Douban groups, Zhihu and TikTok further illustrate that the Internet has become an important space for young people to manage waithood. Through sharing experiences, mutual support and content creation, they transform anxiety and waiting into actionable social and economic resources.

5. Conclusion

This study aims to explore the new waithood experienced by Chinese returnees after completing their overseas education. The research results show that their waiting state is shaped by the gap between international mobility and actual social mobility. Analysis reveals that family investment pressure, identity misalignment, low employment rates, and changes in the value of overseas academic qualifications all delay the economic independence and adult transition of returned students. This supports the initial assumption of this article: Studying abroad does not automatically lead to stable employment, social recognition or upward social mobility.

The theoretical contribution of this article lies in extending the concept of waithood to the context of returned Chinese students. Returning overseas students are often imagined as a group with advantages and mobility, but this article finds that waithood can also occur among young people

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with middle-class backgrounds, high education and international experience. This research holds practical significance for youth studies, international education and career guidance, as it reminds families, schools and students to have a more realistic understanding of the value of overseas education.

However, the limitation of this study lies in its main reliance on literature reviews and online platform cases, which may affect the universal applicability of the research conclusions. Future research can further expand the analysis through interviews, questionnaires, or more statistical data. Overall, this article provides new insights into the delayed adulthood of returned overseas students and emphasizes that when understanding this phenomenon, both structural pressures and individual strategies need to be taken into consideration simultaneously.

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