

PCERII Working Paper Series

**INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERENCE OF HUMAN
CAPITAL AND OCCUPATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF
RECENT CHINESE PROFESSIONAL IMMIGRANTS IN
CANADA**

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INTERNATIONAL TRANSFERENCE OF HUMAN CAPITAL AND OCCUPATIONAL ATTAINMENT OF RECENT CHINESE PROFESSIONAL IMMIGRANTS IN CANADA

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Chinese professional immigrants who obtained their education outside of Canada often experience disadvantages in obtaining professional jobs in the Canadian labour force. These disadvantages are related to many factors such as linguistic abilities, Canadian experience, the state of the labour market, and nonrecognition or devaluation of foreign credentials and work experiences. Based on survey data collected in the cities of Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Edmonton, Calgary, and Saskatoon, the paper examines how these factors affect occupational attainment of recent mainland Chinese professional immigrants. The findings indicate that the problem of transferring educational equivalencies across international boundaries results in professional immigrants taking jobs for which they are overtrained, resulting in downward occupational mobility relative to the occupations held in China before their immigrating to Canada. It argues that “brain drain” or “brain gain” is not a simply phenomenon of an outflow or inflow of professional migrants, and it has to do with actual international transference and utilization of human capital resources.

Mainland China has become the number one immigration source country for Canada. 40,296 immigrants from mainland China entered Canada in 2001: 16.1 percent of the total number of immigrants that year (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2001:8). Most of these immigrants were well trained and experienced professionals seeking good opportunities in Canada. However, after entering the country, many of them found difficulties in obtaining professional jobs they expected, and consequently, they experienced downward occupational mobility.

There are two themes in the literature on occupational attainment of professional immigrants. The first focuses primarily on individual barriers experienced by

Keywords: Immigration; Chinese immigrants; Professionals; Occupational attainment; Credential; Mobility.

professional immigrants, arguing that those who wish to work in Canada must acquire the equivalence in terms of Canadian standards. Individual barriers include the inability to meet occupational entry requirements, a lack of Canadian experience, and an inadequate command of English (Ornstein and Sharma, 1983). Basavarajappa and Verma (1985) argue that period of residence in Canada has a crucial impact on the ability of Asian immigrants to receive returns for their high educational attainments. As well, they suggest that a lack of Canadian experience and failure to meet Canadian professional standards may cause problems for professional immigrants.

Although the individual approach has elucidated some personal difficulties, it has not explained how the structural factors pertaining to policies, criteria, and procedures for evaluation also contribute to occupational disadvantages for foreign-trained professionals. Failure to locate individual barriers in social conditions and structural arrangements tends to assign blame to immigrant professionals themselves for failing to acquire professional jobs in Canada.

The second theme stresses structural barriers such as unequal opportunity, devaluation of foreign credentials, and racism. It suggests that control of entry to the professions has caused systematic exclusion and occupational disadvantages for professional immigrants (Boyd, 1985; McDade, 1988; Trovato and Grindstaff, 1986; Rajagopal, 1990; Ralston, 1988; Beach and Worswick, 1989). For instance, Boyd provides an analysis of differences between Canadian-born and foreign-born workers in the acquisition of occupational status. Boyd argues that the Canadian-born receive a greater return for their education compared to the foreign-born because of "difficulties of transferring educational skill across national boundaries" (Boyd, 1985: 405). In their research, Fernando and Prasad report that among professional immigrants interviewed, particularly doctors and engineers, 71% had perceived barriers to full recognition (Fernando and Prasad, 1986).

Several studies use census data to demonstrate the difficulties in translating educational achievements into occupational advantage faced by selected cohorts of immigrants (Trovato and Grindstaff, 1986; Grindstaff, 1986). Pendakur and Pendakur's research (1996: 26) suggests that even when controlling for occupation, industry, education, potential experience, CMA, official language knowledge and household type, visible minorities earn significantly less than native-born white workers.

Previous survey research often deals with foreign-trained professional immigrants in general; and studies that focus on visible minority foreign-trained professionals

are lacking. As visible minority foreign-trained professionals have distinctive cultural backgrounds and experiences that differ from white foreign-trained professionals, they may be more disadvantaged in the Canadian labour force. Richmond, for example, suggests that despite high levels of education, visible minority immigrants from Third World countries appear to be particularly vulnerable in the Canadian labour market (1984: 253).

The purpose of this paper is to use survey data to highlight both the individual and structural barriers of occupational attainment for recent Chinese professional immigrants. In particular, this study inquires into the experiences and perceptions of Chinese professional immigrants.

Source of Data

This analysis is based on survey data collected in the cities of Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa, Calgary, Edmonton, and Saskatoon between 1997 and 1999. In total, 1,180 mainland Chinese professional immigrants were surveyed.

“Mainland Chinese professional immigrants” refers to those who received their professional training in China, who entered Canada as immigrants, and who were residents in Canada at the time of the study.

The demographic characteristics of respondents are as follows: 34% became Canadian citizens and 66% were permanent residents; 56% were male and 44 percent were female. In terms of age, 18% were between twenty and thirty, 58% were between thirty-one and forty years of age, 20% were between forty-one and fifty years of age, and 4% were over fifty. Eighty-three percent were married. Fifty-seven percent had lived in Canada for less than 4 years, 16% had been residents for 4–6 years and 27% had been in Canada for more than 6 years. About 95% of respondents had at least a bachelor’s degree, and 39% of respondents had a Master’s or Doctorate degree. Before immigrating to Canada, the professions among the respondents were primarily engineers (38%), school/university teachers (25%), medical doctors (8.7%), and other professionals (7%). The largest number of respondents (29%) lived in Toronto; 23% were from Ottawa; 21% from Calgary, 14% from Edmonton, 10% from Vancouver and 3% from Saskatoon.

The data were obtained through self-administered questionnaires. The questionnaire, included 71 questions on credentials, work experience before and

after immigration, personal difficulties and perceived structural barriers in accessing professional jobs in the Canadian labour force, opinions on policy issues, and general respondent information. The questionnaires were delivered personally by research assistants to prospective respondents who were willing to participate in the survey.

Since the total target population is unknown, it is difficult to assess statistically how representative the sample is.

Occupational Attainment and Downward Mobility

Table 1 shows that 79% of 1150 respondents reported having worked as professionals (doctors, engineers, school/university teachers, and other professionals) in China before immigrating. However, only 31% said that they worked or had worked as professionals in Canada. Although 5.5% of the respondents became proprietors, managers, supervisors, and administrators, 41.1% of the respondents had lower social status in nonprofessional jobs, and 22.4% had never worked in Canada.

Foreign Work Experience, Foreign Credentials, and Occupational Attainment

Chinese professional immigrants came to Canada with the desire to work in their field of qualification, but not all of them have succeeded. To what extent were their jobs related to their field of expertise? More importantly, what barriers to labour market integration have the respondents identified with regard to their personal experiences?

Many thought that the greater the number of years of professional experience, the better their chances to get a job in their field in Canada. This assumption, however, turned out to be an illusion. In our survey, 94% of Chinese professional immigrants reported that they had professional work experience in China before immigrating to Canada, 50% had five to ten years of professional work experience and 21% had more than 10 years of professional work experience. Interestingly, as Table 2 shows, Chinese professionals with more professional experience are more likely to experience downward mobility.

The problem has to do with nonrecognition of foreign work experience in Canada. In our survey, about 47% of respondents do not believe that "the foreign

**Table 1 Occupational Attainment in China and in Canada for
Mainland Chinese Professional Immigrants**

	In China		In Canada	
	n	%	n	%
1. Professional				
Doctor	103	8.7	17	1.4
Engineer	453	38.4	178	15.1
School/University teacher	295	25.0	66	5.6
Other professionals	81	6.9	105	8.9
Subtotal:	932	79.0	366	31.0
2. Nonprofessional				
Proprietary	4	0.3	33	2.8
Managerial	52	4.4	17	1.4
Administrative	55	4.7	15	1.3
Clerical	21	1.8	31	2.6
Sales	13	1.1	48	4.1
Operative	12	1.0	103	8.7
Service	5	0.4	83	7.0
Unskilled	0	0.0	80	6.8
Farm	0	0.0	3	0.3
Other	58	4.9	137	11.6
Subtotal:	220	18.6	550	46.6
3. Never worked	28	2.4	264	22.4
Total:	1180	100.0	1180	100.0

Table 2 Occupational Mobility by Number of Year of Foreign Professional Experience

	No Experience		1-4 years		5-10 years		Over 10 years	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Upward Mobility	14	19.4	19	7.0	15	2.6	6	2.4
Remain the Same	20	27.8	103	37.7	179	30.4	90	36.4
Downward Mobility	38	52.8	151	55.3	394	67.0	151	62.2
Total	72	100.0	273	100.0	588	100.0	247	100.0

work experience is compared to Canadian standards fairly.” Chinese professional immigrants encounter a difficult situation in the Canadian labour market. On the one hand, nonrecognition of their foreign professional work experience disqualifies their entry into professional jobs leaving them no chance to get Canadian work experience; on the other hand, the emphasis on Canadian work experience as a requirement for professional employment makes it difficult for them to qualify for professional jobs.

Many Chinese professional immigrants believe that they could not enter professional occupations in which they were trained because their foreign credentials were devaluated. In our survey, 69% of the 1,180 respondents reported that they experienced difficulties in having their foreign credentials recognized in Canada. Based on their own experience and observation, 77.5% of respondents reported that “the difficulty in having their foreign qualifications or credentials recognized” was a major factor that affected or might have affected their chances to practice in their chosen professions.

Table 3 shows that 74.7% of respondents reported that their occupations in their home country matched their professional qualifications well, while 23.3% reported that their current (or last) occupation in Canada matched their professional qualifications. About 40.7% of respondents reported that they were overqualified for their current occupations in Canada, and 28.7% said they have not worked since their arrival in Canada.

**Table 3 Occupational Match to Professional Qualification for Chinese Professional Immigrants
before and after Immigration to Canada**

	How did your occupation in your home country match your professional qualification before immigrating to Canada?		How does your current (or last) occupation in Canada match your professional qualification?	
	n	%	n	%
Perfectly matched	882	74.7	275	23.3
Overqualified	201	17.0	480	40.7
Underqualified	63	5.3	86	7.3
Never worked or no answer	34	2.9	339	28.7
Total:	1180	100.0	1180	100.0

Language Barriers, Adaptation, and Length of Time in Canada

In the survey, 49.3% of respondents reported that they have experienced difficulties with their command of English, and 34.2% also experienced difficulties in adapting to western culture. Table 4 shows that among those who answered “difficult” or “very difficult” with regard to command of English, 70% have experienced downward occupational mobility. Among those answered “difficult” or “very difficult” in adaptation to western culture, 65% have experienced downward occupational mobility. The data do show the effect of linguistic abilities and cultural adaptation on downward mobility. However, they also indicate that “linguistic abilities” and “cultural adaptation” alone cannot fully explain the downward mobility of Chinese professional immigrants. Among those who answered “no difficulty” or “less difficult” in command of English and adaptation to western culture, 54% and 61% respectively reported having experienced downward mobility.

The language barrier can be overcome in time through personal effort. The survey shows that as the length of time in Canada increases, the percentage of downward

Table 4 Mobility Between the Last Occupation in China and Current Occupation in Canada by Linguistic Abilities and by Level of Adaptation to Western Culture as Reported by Chinese Professional Immigrants

	Command of English				Adaptation to Western Culture				
	No Difficulty or Less Difficult		Difficult or Very Difficult		No Difficulty or Less Difficult		Difficult or Very Difficult		
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Downward Mobility	308	54	388	70	Downward Mobility	440	61	245	65
Remain the Same	226	40	147	27	Remain the Same	253	35	117	31
Upward Mobility	32	6	16	3	Upward Mobility	33	4	16	4
Total (Missing=63)	566	100	551	100	Total (Missing=76)	726	100	378	100

Table 5 Mobility between the Last Occupation in China and Current Occupation in Canada by Length of Time in Canada

	1 Year %	2-4 Years %	5-10 Years %	Over 10 Years %
Downward Mobility	76	56	56	48
Remain the Same	22	40	37	35
Upward Mobility	2	4	7	17
Total	100 (384)	100 (364)	100 (378)	100 (54)

mobility rate decreases (Table 5). This suggests that the linguistic abilities and level of adaptation of new immigrants improves when they stay in Canada for a longer period of time.

Perceived Structural Barriers, Occupational Disadvantages, and Income

In addition to individual barriers, most Chinese professional immigrants perceived some structural barriers that affect their occupational attainment in Canada. About 73% of respondents believed that they could not enter into professional occupations in which they are trained because there is unequal opportunity for visible minority immigrants. About 77% reported that it was difficult for them to find professional jobs because of a shortage of opening positions in the Canadian labour market. The major systemic barrier identified by respondents is that their foreign credentials and work experience were devalued by professional organizations, government evaluation agencies, and educational institutions.

The respondents were asked if the colour of their skin, national or ethnic origin, and ESL status were factors in the evaluation of their credentials and recognition of foreign experience. Forty-four percent of respondents perceived discrimination on the basis of skin colour, while 43% mentioned national or ethnic origin and 55% indicated that speaking English as a second language was a factor that influenced the evaluation of their credentials and recognition of foreign experience.

Occupational disadvantages also affect the economic status of Chinese professional immigrants. When asked about their total annual income from all sources before taxes, 19.1% reported no income; 25.2% had an income of less than \$20,000; 28.6% had an income of between \$20,000 and \$29,999; 16.1% reported an income of between \$30,000 and \$49,999; and 6.9% had an income of \$50,000 or over. This indicates that about 73% of Chinese professional immigrants in our sample either had no income or an annual gross income of less than \$30,000.

Conclusion

The study suggests that Chinese professional immigrants in Canada perceive that they face both individual and institutionalized barriers to entry into their respective

professions. Individual barriers such as linguistic abilities and cultural adaptation can gradually improve over time through immigrants' personal efforts, community support, and programs and services provided by the Canadian government. However, immigrants themselves cannot resolve institutionalized barriers, such as the devaluation of credentials, unequal opportunity, and racism. It is sometimes difficult to separate individual barriers from structural barriers, especially for visible minority foreign-trained professionals who may perceive racial discrimination. For example, lacking Canadian experience is an individual attribute, but it is related to employers and/or professional bodies who refuse to recognize foreign credentials and to hire immigrants in jobs suited to their training. From the vantage point of Chinese professional immigrants, it would not be accurate to consider their occupational disadvantages as resulting from two types of barriers in isolation.

The problem of transferring educational equivalencies and work experience across international boundaries results in Chinese professional immigrants taking jobs for which they are overtrained, resulting in downward occupational mobility. It is evident that professional immigrants bring significant human capital resources to the Canadian labour force. However, a better understanding is needed of how these human resources are actually used after the immigrants' arrival in Canada. It is essential for Canadian federal and provincial governments, and professional organizations to understand how highly educated foreign-trained professional immigrants establish themselves in the Canadian labour force and what systemic barriers they encounter. The study suggests that in order for Canada to fully benefit from international human capital transfer, a policy is needed to ensure that the credentials of foreign-trained professional immigrants are properly and fairly evaluated.

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