

Navigating the Non-Academic Labor Market: Early Career Trajectories of Chinese Doctoral Graduates from Social Science and Humanities (SSH)

Sangge Qi

University of Turku, Finland

Abstract

With global policy discourses putting significant emphasis on the knowledge-based economy, the number of PhDs awarded by universities has risen substantially in recent decades. Doctoral education has long been deemed as a preparation for academic professions. In recent years, however, a considerable proportion of PhDs has chosen to leave the academy upon graduation and seek careers outside academia. As one of the leading PhD-producing countries in the world today, China shares a similar pattern: close to 50% of Chinese doctoral graduates are working in non-academic sectors since 2018. This study explores the non-academic career trajectories of doctoral graduates from Social Science and Humanities (SSH) in the context of China. Upon entering the non-academic labor market, doctoral graduates are exposed to an intensified positional competition and placed within a hierarchy of job seekers. Employability is considered in relative terms, depending largely on how well graduates can demonstrate the exclusivity of their credentials and prove their worth relative to other competitors. Meanwhile, this positional competition is further complicated with hierarchical differences arising at institutional (i.e., university ranking and disciplinary background) and social (i.e., age and gender) levels. A resulting symbolic position is created for each individual graduate, implying what one feels possible to expect in forging non-academic careers and their relative standings in the labor market. Taking graduates' relative standings and the subsequent influence on their career possibilities into consideration, this study delves into personal narratives of post-PhD career experiences to unpack the rationales, conditions and agentic efforts behind individual career choices.

Keywords: doctoral education, doctoral employment, employability, non-academic career trajectory, navigation