An emotional journey of identity change and transformation

The impact of study-abroad experience on the lives and careers of Chinese students and returnees

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Abstract

This article discusses the nature of Chinese students' transnational experiences and its impact on their identities within and beyond national and cultural boundaries. The discussion is located in the theoretical framework of transnationalism and explores in detail the ways in which students adapt, change and develop, both in the host country of their study and also on their return to work in their home countries. Empirical evidence in the article is drawn from the findings of three studies, led by the author, which have investigated the pedagogical, sociocultural and emotional challenges that Chinese students have encountered when studying at British universities, and the perceived impact of their overseas studies on their lives and careers in their home countries. The research findings suggest that there are distinctive patterns of challenges, struggles, adjustments, change and achievement over time – all of which are embedded in the processes of socialisation, enculturation and professionalisation. Such experiences are both transitional and transformational and, most profoundly, they necessitate identity change at and across different layers of boundaries. At the heart of this identity change is a constant, emotional search for a reflexive sense of self as an embodied individual, a member of a professional group and a member of an organisation.

The context: the mobility of international and Chinese students

Historical accounts of student mobility and intercultural education can be traced back to 272–22 BC (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001). However, the forms, volume and speed of international students' mobility have undergone profound changes over time. In modern times and in the last two decades especially, the mobility of international students has become a qualitatively and quantitatively distinct phenomenon. This exponential growth is a reflection of the revolutionary development of the internationalisation of global higher education; and is driven 'in part by the demand for a knowledge-based economy and highly skilled human resources' (UNESCO 2013: iii). As a result of its economic expansion, China has assumed greater prominence in the global business of internationalisation. Three features of this growth are of particular note.

First, China is the largest sending country of foreign students in the world's higher education market. Globally, the population of international mobile students has proliferated in recent decades and is predicated to continue to surge. According to the statistics from UNESCO (2013), the number of students enrolled in educational institutions outside their country of origin increased from 1.3 million in 1999 to 4.3 million in 2011, representing an increase of almost 70 per cent. One in five of the world's international students is from either China or India (World Education Services 2012).

The upsurge of Chinese students studying abroad can be traced back to a speech by China's reformist and former leader, Deng Xiaoping, in June 1978: 'We are going to send thousands or tens of thousands of students to receive overseas education' (Xinhua News Agency 2004). Almost four decades after Deng's speech, the number of Chinese students studying abroad has indisputably met his expectations. According to statistics from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, 1.07 million Chinese students studied overseas between 1978 and 2006 (*China Daily* 2007). In 2007, 421,000 Chinese students contributed to the

statistics of international student mobility (UNESCO 2009). By 2012, the number of Chinese students studying abroad had increased to an astonishing 694,400 (UNESCO 2014).

Second, China has become one of the top ten destination countries for internationally mobile students (British Council 2012; UNESCO 2009, 2014). Since the turn of the century, the landscape of global student mobility has become more diversified. Although the United States of America and the United Kingdom remain 'strong magnets' for students seeking quality education, with each enjoying 18 per cent and 11 per cent of the total population of mobile students, respectively (UNESCO 2014), they have seen a decline in their favourable shares of the revenue, and the intellectual capital of international mobile students (from 55 per cent in 2000 to 47 per cent in 2012), as regional hubs became popular destinations for students within regions (OECD 2014; UNESCO 2009, 2014). In East Asia and the Pacific, China, Malaysia, South Korea, Singapore and New Zealand have emerged as new hot-spot destination countries – with China hosting 2 per cent of the global share of mobile students in 2012 (UNESCO 2014).

Third, international student migration brings into the foreground *current* interactions between politics, cultures and social and economic processes and growing disparities between groups of people and socioeconomic classes. Despite the persistent increase in the mobility of international students, studying abroad activity remains reserved for a select few (International Association of Universities 2010). In the case of China, where students are encouraged to study abroad as part of the country's capacity-building strategy (OECD/World Bank 2007), only fewer than 2 per cent of tertiary students from China study abroad (UNESCO 2009). They represent two groups of elites in the society: the socioeconomic elite (e.g. mostly self-funded students) and the educated elite (e.g. students funded by scholarships) (Wang and Miao 2013).

Taken together, analyses of the current contexts of the mobility of international students, and Chinese students in particular, show that they have become, increasingly and significantly, a prominent border-crossing population in the global migration movements who carry with them, beyond graduation, the attitudes, skills and contacts that they have developed during their studies outside their usual countries of residence. The complex and heterogeneous composition of this group and the diverse and dynamic nature of their experiences have attracted scholars from different disciplines, driven by their distinct theoretical, methodological and ideological concerns, to unravel this relatively nascent field (e.g. Cushner and Karim 2004; Glass and Westmont 2013; Gu 2009; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015; Smith and Khawaja 2011; Suspitsyna 2012; Ward and Kennedy 1993; Waters and Leung 2013; Zhang and Goodson 2011).

Despite the growing literature, well-grounded empirical research that depicts the transnational experiences of internationally mobile students (including Chinese students) is still in its infancy. This is especially the case if we also include the experiences of graduate returnees in the continuum of mobility experiences. Drawing upon empirical evidence from a number of studies undertaken by the author and her colleagues over the last decade, this article focuses on the ways in which Chinese students adapt, change and develop personally and professionally beyond cultural and national borders. Concepts from theories of transnationalism are used as research lenses to explore the ways in which Chinese students negotiate *meaning* at and across cultural boundaries and to demonstrate how and why, for many Chinese students, their transnational study experience is essentially an emotional journey of professional growth and personal expansion. For them, profound identity transformation is an inevitable and most prominent outcome of this journey.

Learning to be and become transnational: a journey of change

The theory of transnationalism has attracted a growing interest in social science in recent years – primarily as a positive response to an increasingly 'flat' world (Friedman 2005), where a transnational life, either physically or virtually, has become the norm for many individuals across nation-states. In contrast to the 'old' long-distance connections maintained by migrants a hundred years ago, today's 'new' global interconnectedness, facilitated by improved technology, telecommunication and transformation, is substantively different in its scale, intensity and velocity (Held et al. 1999; Portes 2003; Smith 2003; Vertovec 2009). Transnationalism is essentially concerned with 'linkages between people, places and institutions crossing nation-state borders' (Vertovec 2009: 1), which lead to 'sustained cross-border relationships, patterns of exchange, affiliations and social formation' (Vertovec 2009: 2).

> Transnationalism describes a condition in which, despite great distances and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kinds of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common – however virtual – arena of activity (Vertovec 2009: 3).

Using the transnational lens to delineate the lived worlds of Chinese students and their journeys of change during and after their studies is highly relevant in at least three respects. First, it is not a coincidence that international students (including Chinese students) have been widely regarded – by politicians as well as researchers – as a distinct migrant group. Many 'live dual lives' (Portes 1997: 812) in which they move between their place of origin and the host country. They maintain cultural connections and social ties in both places, and through these networks, pursue their educational and career interests across borders. As illustrated by the study on the wider benefits of international higher education in the U.K. (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2013), although the effects of such transnational activities of

a single student on the culture of the host society may be limited, when they are multiplied across hundreds of thousands of internationally mobile students, the value can add up to 'a social process of significant economic and social impact for communities' of which they are part (Portes 2003: 877).

Related to the above is the second point in that internationally mobile students create their 'transnational social spaces' (Pries 1999) in which they encounter, transfer and (re)produce meanings, attitudes and skills that embrace 'here' and 'there'. Gu and Schweisfurth argue that

Of particular relevance is the nature of the locality in which they live during their period abroad. Our previous research has demonstrated the importance of receiving universities typically as a particular type of community, which is intentionally, self-consciously and de facto international in its outlook and composition (Schweisfurth and Gu 2009; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day 2010): a kind of transnational 'bubble' within a wider local and national context (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015: 4).

It is within this transnational 'bubble' that many international students and Chinese students experience, especially initially, emotional loss, loneliness, isolation and detachment. However, they soon learn to use *familiar* social networks both 'here' and 'elsewhere' to engage with new places and new cultures in ways that enable them to develop *transnational* or *diasporic consciousness* that is marked by 'dual or multiple identifications' (Vertovec 2009: 6). These bilateral social and cultural connections serve a dual purpose. On the one hand, social and cultural ties at home (or elsewhere) consolidate mobile students' sense of being different in the host culture and society. On the other hand, they also stimulate a desire in students to connect themselves with those who share the same 'routes' and 'roots' (Gilroy 1987, 1993) in their transnational bubbles. As the experiences of students in our research show, such desire to establish social and cultural connections with people 'here' and 'there' is

deeply associated with a search to belong in the locality. Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) argue

that the awareness of these in the transmigrant student-self facilitates a range of bonds that

they build and maintain with others who have similar experiences, or whose identity or

identities overlap in any number of ways with their own. In so doing, their attachments are

'decentred', marked by a sense of being at 'home' in more than one place (or, potentially, no

particular place). In this sense, transnational consciousness, which is essentially composed of

an awareness of multi-locality and an abstract awareness of one's self and their decentred

attachments can ultimately lead to an enhanced sense of double or multiple belonging (Collins

2010; Ghosh and Wang 2003; Salih 2002, 2003; Vertovec 2004, 2009).

     Last but not least, the literature on migrant transnationalism suggests that such dual or

multiple orientations of 'cross-cutting belongingness' (Vertovec 2001: 580) are developed in

transnational social spaces that are characterised by '*triadic relationships* between groups and

institutions in the host state, the sending state (sometimes viewed as an external homeland)

and the minority group – migrants and/or refugee groups, or ethnic minorities' (Faist 1998:

213, original emphasis). For many international students, the triadic relationships are the

cross-border social worlds or spaces in which they learn to negotiate their individual identities

and 'an enhanced "bi-focality" of outlooks' (Vertovec 2004: 970), which may continue to

influence their perceptions of a transnationalised self, the makeup of their social and

professional networks, and their transnational practices upon return to their home countries.

Gu and Schweisfurth (2015) argue that for Chinese students especially, reaching this stage

from monocultural roots is not simply a question of skill acquisition. Rather, it is

fundamentally a process of identity transformation. This identity transformation *is* a social

process that exists in a social world that spans national, societal and cultural borders; and as

with other intercultural identities, it is multidimensional that is comprised of personal

(relating to efficacy and values), enactment (relating to performance), relational (relating to

relationship as the locus of identity), and communal (relating to common group characteristics) layers (Hecht, Collier and Ribeau 1993; Hecht et al. 2005). Our studies of Chinese students have shown that each of these layers has a particular manifestation for migrant students as transnational actors, both while they are abroad and when they return to their home countries.

The studies

The empirical evidence for this article comprises the findings of three studies over the last decade, led by the author and her colleagues, investigating different aspects of international and Chinese students' study and living experiences in U.K. higher education, and how such experiences contribute to their work and lives upon return to their home countries for work. A distinctive strength of the studies is the holistic and developmental perspective that has enabled the author and her colleagues to probe into a learning and change process that is itself holistic and developmental in nature.

Study 1

This small-scale study (2004–2005) investigated the challenges that Chinese students had faced in their adaptation to the U.K. higher education environment. The study functioned as a pilot for Study 2 (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006) and involved the collection of both qualitative interview data and quantitative questionnaire survey data. A total of 163 questionnaires (in English) were collected from Chinese students on undergraduate and postgraduate courses in four universities in England. Interview participants included thirteen undergraduate and postgraduate students in ten universities, and there were two focus groups from the questionnaire sample. To ease the expression of meaning, all student interviews were conducted in Chinese. Further triangulation was provided by semi-structured interviews with

ten British lecturers, probing their personal impressions and experiences of the Chinese students they had taught.

The research sample size, particularly the quantitative data, would not enable the author to arrive at generalised conclusions, but there were indicative patterns emerging from early analysis. These patterns complement findings from the other two studies, revealing a change process in the learners, affected by a range of interrelated personal, cultural, social, psychological and contextual factors.

Study 2

This two-year, mixed methods study (funded by the U.K. Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)) (2006–2008) was designed to investigate the experiences of first-year international students during their undergraduate study at four U.K. universities (Gu, Schweisfurth and Day 2010; Schweisfurth and Gu 2009).

The first stage was a four-page 70-item questionnaire (in English) to all 1,288 first-year international undergraduates at four U.K. universities – two 'old' universities (institutions which pre-date 1992) and two 'new' ones (former polytechnics). It explored the nature of the initial challenges and the needs that international students encountered shortly after their arrival in the U.K. The survey had a 19 per cent rate of return. In the second stage, ten case study students were chosen from among those who volunteered (including one student from Mainland China and one from Macao). A series of individual interviews and one group meeting explored their experiences over a fifteen-month period, with special attention to critical incidents, changes over time and respondents' explanations for how their experiences were unfolding. The qualitative data gathering also used narrative interviews with the assistance of an instrument adapted from the VITAE study (Day et al. 2006). This instrument, known as 'Managing the Ups and Downs of Living and Studying' (MUDLS),

required students to recall peaks and troughs during their stay in the U.K. and to identify 'turning points' (Strauss 1959). These were key moments and experiences that had had a significantly positive or negative impact on their perceptions of their effective management of their study, lives and communication with others. They related how these were managed (or not managed) over time. The final data gathering took the form of a second survey of the same population of international undergraduates as in the first stage, achieving a response rate of 10 per cent (N=126). This explored changes over time, and tested the qualitative findings from the case studies, to examine whether they had wider validity.

Study 3

The third study (2008–2009), funded by the British Academy, investigated the impact of study-abroad experiences on the lives and careers of Chinese returnees (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). This twenty-month two-stage research project also combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The first stage was an online questionnaire survey which explored the Chinese returnees' perceived professional and personal change, resulting from their U.K. educational experiences. The questionnaire was distributed by the British Council and a total of 652 completed questionnaires were returned. Although the response rate of 8 per cent was low and we cannot claim the representativeness of the profiles of the sample, the size of the response still enabled us to conduct robust analyses and through these identify common patterns in the transnational experiences of this distinctive group of travellers and settlers in the current context of internationalisation. The results of the survey informed the design of the second stage of the research, whereby fourteen returnees were chosen for face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The purpose of the interviews was to investigate in greater depth the nature of

returnees' transnational experiences and the ways in which such experiences continue (or do not continue) to influence them as individuals at work and in their personal lives.

For the purpose of this article, results related to Chinese students will be selected from the general findings of the three studies. By bringing together patterns and themes identified in these studies, it becomes clear that irrespective of their differing demographic and economic backgrounds, for many Chinese students study abroad is an emotional journey of identity change and transformation in which they are engaged in a constant search for *who they are* and *whom they want to be* as they move across national borders and associated cultural, social and structural boundaries.

Findings: an emotional journey of identity change and transformation

Study abroad: an emotional condition of change

'Enjoyment' and 'loneliness' do not logically collocate well together. However, when they were put together by a postgraduate student to summarise his social life whilst studying in the U.K., the term conveyed a powerful and profound psychological and emotional frustration that he had to cope with. This student is not alone. The following example shows that feelings of being lonely and 'not belonging here' contributed to some Chinese students' sense of alienation in the host society.

> I was just wondering why I didn't feel lonely at all when I first came here. Because I didn't know what was going to happen. So every day was a new day … But this time I came back to England [after the Easter break], I know routinely what happens every day. I know that I will have a presentation to prepare and lots of course work to deal with … Every day follows the same routine and feels 'normal'. To be honest, I don't like my personal life here. I enjoy my study but my personal and social life is kind of boring. … Everybody has got their own stuff to do. … I just feel that I don't belong

here. This is not my place. I'm the guest and they are the host; and the guest is always less powerful (Study 2: Jiayi, female, 22).

Jiayi's accounts of her emotional frustrations and detachment from the environment to which she was exposed support Furnham's (2004: 17) observation that 'foreign students face several difficulties, some exclusive to them (as opposed to native students)'. In our studies, these particular difficulties were shown to be caused by challenges to students' professional identities and unfamiliarity with societal values, structures and systems, and, ultimately, feelings of 'being rejected by, or rejecting, members of the new culture' and the new environment (Oberg 1960, cited in Furnham 2004: 17) (as in the case of Jiayi). Lewthwaite concluded in his study that 'the differences in values, attitudes and beliefs between home and host cultures were seen as great and coupled with the sense of loss of the familiar (including food) put considerable pressure on the student' (1986: 178). An important point is that twenty years on, seemingly, his observation continues to apply to the experiences of many of today's Chinese students.

The other important observation from our studies is that the experience of study abroad entails not only financial and career investment, but also emotional investment. For some, the decision to study abroad was the outcome of a 'rational calculation' which had meant 'giving up opportunities to make money' in exchange for 'an opportunity to have a new beginning in life' (Study 3: Hu, male, 45). For others, it had meant leaving their loved ones behind temporarily in pursuit of an opportunity to recharge themselves for 'a new chapter' in their careers:

When I left China, my parents and my child came to see me off at the airport. With so much that I have left behind and with so much that I should be concerned for, I had no courage to take a look at my parents and my child. … When I was walking through the

security, I could hear my daughter's sweet voice. She was calling me again and again but I did not dare to look back. I was very sad (Study 3: Ren, male, 35).

It follows that these emotions were reported to have fuelled them with strength and enabled them to overcome setbacks whilst studying abroad. This was because, at least in part, expectations, love and support of family and friends from 'home' functioned as personal resources that helped them to reconnect with a sense of belonging, engage with unfamiliar places, values and cultures and, ultimately, reground lives uprooted in the process of migration (Ahmed, Castañeda and Fortie 2003). Examples from Study 3 show that these virtual but real emotional and social ties with family, a sense of belonging and societal recognition were also a clear pull factor which had drawn many Chinese back 'home' – despite work opportunities elsewhere. For example:

Although both Japan and Britain offered attractive work opportunities, I belong to China. The recognition from my family and friends are important to me (Study 3: Qian, male, 30).

However, so far, few studies have explored the emotional nature of Chinese students' study-abroad experience. The negative emotions – mostly associated with a sense of loss and detachment – and positive emotions – mostly associated with a sense of attachment and support – interact and influence their ability to cope, survive and succeed socially, culturally and educationally in the host country. Emotions, in this sense, are the necessary link between the social structures in which Chinese students study and live, and the ways in which they act. Barbalet, in his sociology of the emotions, suggests that

The connection is never mechanical because emotions are normally not compelling but inclining. But without the emotions category, accounts of situated actions would be fragmented and incomplete. Emotion is provoked by circumstance and is experienced as transformation of dispositions to act. It is through the subject's active

exchange with others that emotional experience is both stimulated in the actor and orienting of their conduct. Emotion is directly implicated in the actor's transformation of their circumstances, as well as circumstances' transformation of the actor's disposition to act (Barbalet 2002: 4).

As evidence in the rest of the article will show, for many Chinese students and returnees, the most profound outcome of their attempt to engage meaningfully in the environments in which they studied and lived is their identity transformation, or, in other words, personal growth. Such growth is perceived by many Chinese students in our studies as associated with their broadened worldview and interests in life and a stronger sense of their own capabilities to use these in work.

Identity change and transformation

Broadened worldview

The ability to reflect on and be critical of their underlying values and attitudes towards themselves and their home cultures and open themselves up to divergent cultural values in the host society is an outcome that is worth celebrating. This is because, as illustrated above, the journey to achieve this is not a simple one.

All three studies found that an unexpected but powerful outcome of internationally mobile students' reflexive evaluation of their past in China and present everyday experiences in the U.K. was their development of a transnational perspective which enabled them to be more appreciative of their own cultural traditions and values. As Heusinkvelt, writing about teaching foreign languages, pointed out, 'indeed the greatest shock may not be in the encounter with a different culture but in the recognition of how our own culture has shaped us and what we do' (1997: 489).

Over half of the respondents to the second survey in Study 2 reported that their understanding of the host (U.K.) culture had improved. In addition, 93 per cent indicated that they had become more appreciative of their home-culture values. Upon return home, a 'double consciousness' (Golbert 2001: 717) of the home culture and that of the hosting country, garnered from attempts to connect meaningfully across national and cultural borders, was perceived by the majority of the interviewed participants in Study 3 as having contributed to their heightened transnational conception of culture, values and self. The survey results also supported this observation which showed that more than 73 per cent of Chinese returnees believed that they possessed better knowledge of the home (Chinese) culture than those who have not stayed abroad for a lengthy period of time.

Most of the interview participants in Study 3 reported that life in England was quite a lonely one. However, being alone provided them with the space and time to reflect on the unfamiliar cultural values and behaviour that they had encountered and re-evaluate their own values and the ways in which they used to deal with people in the past 'at home'. As a result, they learned more about themselves and their cultural roots. Such deep-seated self-awareness was found to continue to influence their work and lives after they had returned home for work. For example:

> The understanding of different cultures is of the greatest help to me, which can never be learned in universities at home ... Without the study-abroad experience, maybe I would never get such a clear awareness. It made me look at things from different perspectives and thus enabled me to reflect on problems at a much deeper level. So the overseas experience is highly valuable to me and to my work. Naturally, we all hope that China will develop quickly, but we also know that we still have a lot to do to improve the country. This awareness comes from the comparison with other foreign countries … I'm a patriot and I have become even more patriotic after being abroad,

because in another country, I was made more aware of my roots in China (Study 3: Ze, male, 35).

This sense of being closer to their cultural roots was found to have led to an enhanced and more rational understanding of what being Chinese means.

Upon going home, there was no returning to their old self either because such embodied identification of self and the experience of managing the challenge of different ways of thinking, working and living enabled them to learn to accept the diversity of the world and that of the people who live in it. As well as a general openness to diversity, this extended to a sense of pride that compared with their peers and colleagues, they were able to 'approach problems at a different level and from a different aspect' (Study 3: Wen, female, 27). For them, it is not necessarily the achievements in their academic studies but, as Wen put it, 'the change in the world view and ways of thinking [that] is more important and fundamental'. Such profound change in mindset and values has, perhaps not surprisingly, led many returnees to identify themselves as being different from those around them (i.e. self-identification) and also, at the same time, to feel that they are positioned by others as different 'outsiders' (i.e. group categorisation) (see also Jenkins 2004). In Study 3, 88 per cent of the survey respondents reported that they felt different from others around them in China (regardless of the differences in the respondents' ages or the time period in which they returned to China), and close to half (44 per cent) felt that their colleagues treated them differently, especially among those in their twenties.

Efficacious and confident professionals

As I have reported from the findings of previous studies (Gu and Schweisfurth 2006; Gu 2009; Gu et al. 2010), it is the agency of individual students in navigating the challenges of

study abroad that is of the greatest importance in the personal development they experienced. The returnees in Study 3 reinforce this finding, and suggest its sustainability over time.

> I hope to start my career from a better position. A big city like Beijing provides us with a wider horizon and enables us to access a greater variety of people, which I think is an advantage for my personal development. I'm not fearful about ups and downs in my life and I don't want to lead a stable life when I am still young. There may be challenges in my present life, but because I am trying my best, I won't be regretful whatever the outcome is (Study 3: Qian, male, 30 years old).

Confidence gained from the challenges of the study-abroad experience and the value of the knowledge and skills they gained struck at the heart of returnees' self-concepts and ways of living and working. Over time, the value of their study-abroad experience became increasingly appreciated by themselves, particularly in terms of their intellectual insight and their broadened worldview. For example, many expressed increased confidence, enhanced self-efficacy and positive attitudes in the workplace, particularly in terms of: (1) improved English language skills (92 per cent); (2) increased ability to deal with change and initiatives (88 per cent), work under pressure (85.3 per cent), and take on leadership at work (78 per cent); (3) a more flexible attitude towards work (80 per cent); and (4) better time management and self-planning skills (75 per cent). In addition, 92 per cent believed their work benefitted from the intellectual development that they gained whilst studying abroad – regardless of the difference in their ages, or their length of stay in the U.K. or China ($p > 0.05$). The following quotation from Zeng (Study 3: male, 30) provides further narrative evidence of the value of both subject knowledge and generic skills developed during the study-abroad experience:

> Now, I'm able to live on my subject knowledge, skills and expertise, which I would not have been able to when I finished my undergraduate study in China. With two postgraduate degrees and work experience abroad, I can completely stand up on my

own feet. I am proud that I managed to complete my Master's and doctoral degrees in four years. I had a smooth journey overseas and I am benefiting from that experience professionally. Thanks to that experience, I can now enjoy a new chapter in my life! (Study 3: Zeng, male, 30)

Almost all the interviewed returnees reported that their professional competences had been enhanced by the pedagogies they experienced while studying at U.K. universities. Our previous research (Gu et al. 2010) demonstrated how 'learning shock' was the greatest and least expected challenge in the early stages of international students' studies, but that, over time, they came to value the interactive teaching and learning approaches and the emphasis on independent and critical thinking. In particular, as the results of the survey show, with negligible variation related to the difference in their backgrounds, the large majority of the returnees appreciated: (1) greater independence in analysing and solving problems (96 per cent), with one in three (34 per cent) in strong agreement with this change; (2) more confident and positive attitudes towards life (89 per cent); and (3) increased ability to think creatively (81 per cent) and critically (88 per cent). The data from the interviews suggest that these effects are lasting. For example, 30-year-old Qian reported:

The most important thing that I've learned is that there is a logical way of thinking, a sensible way in which we construct an argument and make a point. This is also, in my opinion, the difference between U.K. education and Chinese education. Chinese education teaches students knowledge, whilst U.K. education trains us to think. I enjoyed the challenge to learn to think more logically and critically. Moreover, I have also learned to reflect on my own strengths and weaknesses … and because of this I had even noticed some wonderful things about myself which I did not know before (Study 3: Qian, male, 30).

These skills and qualities provided them with brighter prospects of working in or starting up international or joint Sino-foreign capital ventures, where such skills are in particularly high demand. It is perhaps, then, not surprising that in the interviews all the returnees narrated the pride in their new professional competence and identities. For example:

The nature of my present work requires a lot of communication and social activities with westerners. The biggest difference between me and those who are only generally good at English is that I can understand the values hidden beneath the language and therefore communicate with western colleagues at a deeper level (Study 3: Wen, female, 27 years old).

As a typical Chinese, I used to be modest and did not know how to demonstrate my strengths in front of others. Unfortunately, this usually placed me in a disadvantageous position in competition. However, the several years I spent in the U.K. has turned me into a very confident professional (Study 3: Qian, male, 30).

Discussion and conclusions

The Chinese students' experiences cited in this article reinforce our earlier conclusions that studying abroad and returning home are dynamic and interconnected transnational experiences (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). Such experiences are typically characterised by Chinese students' constant negotiation, reproduction and expansion of their social, cultural and professional identities in an attempt to enact meanings 'in the course of their everyday lives within and across each of their places of attachment or localities of perceived belonging' (Vertovec 2009: 77). In search of this sense of belonging, of wanting to understand, and to be understood and accepted as part of the host institution and society that sometimes feel not only 'foreign' but also 'alien', they learn to be engaged in a continuous and sustained dialogue. This dialogue is conducted with themselves in their own mind and with others in

their transnational ties about the roots of their identities and social behaviour, about how the exposure to the 'Other' has helped them to know more about their roots and themselves, and about how their values, identities and capabilities transform, as a result of the struggles to position themselves as insiders as well as outsiders as they move across cultural borders.

Upon returning 'home', such struggles to become and to be seen as insiders of their home society continue. This is manifested in their efforts to reconnect with their roles in society and social networks. As time goes by, the identification of self as an outsider often becomes a quiet, internalised conversation in their own minds that is mixed with nostalgia for their past international mobility experience and/or a sense of pride of being *different* from others, including their old colleagues and friends. Most importantly, when individual students and graduates move across borders and settle in, they are engaged in a transnational and intercultural experience that 'takes on the shape of a personal expansion' (Murphy-Lejeune 2003: 113). The attendant exposure to new and different ways of life and of living 'makes the familiar strange' and can serve as a platform for a reflexive process – which helps to nurture the self-transforming individual and which often results in a sense of being distinctly and permanently different from others around them in the workplace and in their local networks (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015).

Taken together, evidence from our studies points to two interconnected observations about the processes and consequences of Chinese students' journeys of studying abroad and coming home. First, it reveals that any attempt to understand international and Chinese students' and returnees' experience must recognise that it is a *relational* process. Within this process, they learn to (re-)engage – virtually (e.g. via the social network media) or physically in person – with individuals or groups of people with whom they are able to build and develop social bonds and connections. These social relationships and ties, in turn, function as

psychological, cognitive and emotional resources that they can draw on to manage a 'new' life both in the countries of study and at 'home'.

Using theories of transnationalism as a framework to analyse Chinese mobile students and returnees has brought to the surface a neglected truth about their emotional worlds; that is, their journeys of going abroad and coming home are essentially concerned with a constant search for *belonging* in a context of human migration flows and increasing global interconnectedness. Linkages and relationships with people who share the same 'routes' and 'roots' (Gilroy 1987, 1993) within and across borders enable them to maintain social bonds and cultural connections – however virtual – in more than one place. The observation of such 'cross-cutting belongingness' (Vertovec 2001: 580) highlights the diversity and complexity of the multi-dimensional and multi-setting connections and networks that study-abroad students use to engage with new places and new cultures in an intellectually meaningful and emotionally enriching way. It also reveals the limitations of an overly simplistic approach to researching the role of co-nationals in the mobile experiences of Chinese (and by extension, international) students, and the need for a more nuanced approach to analysing and understanding their (lack of) immersion in the host culture.

Related to the above is the second observation that the shifts of values, insight, skills and identity in Chinese mobile students and returnees are continuous, profound and far-reaching. They do not arise from a momentary and transient *change.* Almost four decades ago, in his seminal work *Beyond Culture*, Hall wrote about the 'hidden controls' of human behaviour patterns and habitual responses which, although 'usually experienced as though they were innate' (1976: 42), are learned and acquired. When crossing cultural boundaries, these 'hidden controls' are challenged by different (and sometimes contrasting) norms, values and behavioural expectations and, subsequently, brought to the surface to be questioned, examined and evaluated. An immediate and enduring consequence of this process of self-

questioning, comparing and evaluating is that as 'a fundamental part of the thought processes', it enables us 'to make sense of the world and our experience of it' (Phillips 1999: 15).

Jenkins argues that it is within such processes of change that 'identity is constructed in transactions at and across the boundary' (2004: 22). He asserts that during these transactions, 'a balance is struck between (internal) group identification and (external) categorisation by others' (2004: 22). To achieve such balance, the social actor is constantly engaged in a process of identity negotiation, in terms of how they perceive themselves and how they would like to be perceived by others each time they cross the boundary. The most profound outcomes of such negotiations are, as shown by experiences of the Chinese mobile students in this article, their broadened views of the worlds around them, a stronger sense of capabilities and competences at work and, ultimately, transformed and transnationalised identities. However, the value of such profound changes in values, competences and identity has only become increasingly clear to them after they have returned home and as they further develop their careers at home. While there was not always scope for all the returnees to express these new competences and this new confidence on a daily basis in their present place of work, these constitute resources upon which they would always be able to draw: 'Everything I've done, studying, working, travelling around Europe and making friends from the globe, will be treasured forever in my life' (Study 3: Wen, female, 27 years old).

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